INSTITUTIONS OF ANIMOSITY: A NEW LENS FOR EXPLAINING THE U.S.-IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP AND THE ROOTS OF INTRACTABLE CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Long-term, intractable conflicts present one of the greatest challenges to global security today. Sometimes referred to as "frozen," these conflicts between states (or aspiring states like the Palestinian Authority) are characterized by a persistent tone of animosity and a low but simmering level of mutual hostility that occasionally erupts into physical violence. This continual tension fosters an atmosphere of insecurity and unpredictability that has ripple effects far beyond the populations of the adversary states themselves, shaping and limiting the potential for political and economic development across entire regions. The conflict between the U.S. and Iran, now spanning more than four decades, is a prime example in the modern world. Not only has the level of sustained hostility between these two powers been detrimental to their own societies, but periodic bouts of escalation have threatened regional stability and led to the brink of war.

This dissertation will argue that the condition of intractability results when a conflict develops institutional properties that entrench patterns of action and resist attempts at change – an institution of animosity. This occurs as the conflict fosters *constituencies* with an interest in perpetuating hostility. More than just transient actors or groups, these constituencies possess enduring power to draw and bind individuals in common purpose and shape values, perceptions, and opportunities. When powerful constituencies take shape on both sides of the conflict, it creates a self-sustaining synergy that undermines all attempts at resolution and leads to intractability.

As the U.S.-Iranian relationship will demonstrate, the mechanisms which drive this process can be identified and observed. Institutions have impressive staying power, but they also develop and evolve according to timeless patterns. Paradoxically, the very engine of their durability is a constant cycle of renewal and regeneration that adapts to changing conditions. Institutional theory provides a window into how and why some conflicts, like the one between the U.S. and Iran, become intractable.

Just as importantly, because institutions are both constructed and deconstructed through this same set of mechanisms, this approach also promises new insights for the field of conflict resolution.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Long-term, intractable conflicts present one of the greatest challenges to global security today. Sometimes referred to as "frozen," these conflicts between states (or aspiring states like the Palestinian Authority) are characterized by a persistent tone of animosity and a low but simmering level of mutual hostility that occasionally erupts into physical violence. This continual tension fosters an atmosphere of insecurity and unpredictability that has ripple effects far beyond the populations of the adversary states themselves, shaping and limiting the potential for political and economic development across entire regions. The conflict between the U.S. and Iran, now spanning more than four decades, is a prime example in the modern world. Not only has the level of sustained hostility been these two powers been detrimental to their own societies, but periodic bouts of escalation have threatened regional stability and led to the brink of war. The field of Security Studies is often well-equipped to explain why conflicts erupt, but it is much more difficult to discern why certain conflicts persist, while most are eventually settled. This shortcoming makes it difficult to develop effective conflict resolution strategies.

Intractable conflict, like that between the U.S. and Iran, is most often recognized as a violent struggle between two states (or aspiring states) that endures for more than a generation. It can be generally observed that the longer a conflict continues, the more difficult it becomes to resolve with any sense of finality. More significantly, the passing of the torch between generations illustrates an evolution in the nature of the conflict itself. The views, goals, and values of the participants take on new or significantly altered dimensions from those present at the beginning of the hostilities. Whereas the struggle may initially be framed in realist terms as a clash of national interests on both sides, this picture inverts, and national interests become increasingly defined in terms of the conflict. Proponents of

continued hostility inevitably weave narratives which justify the status quo, but linkages with the greater good of society grow increasingly tenuous and debatable.

This dissertation will argue that the condition of intractability is fundamentally caused by a set of institutional processes that work to entrench patterns of action and resist attempts at change. The conflict itself becomes an institution of animosity with properties greater than the sum of its parts. This occurs as the conflict develops *constituencies* on both sides with an interest in perpetuating hostility. More than just transient actors or groups, these constituencies develop enduring power to draw and bind individuals in common purpose and shape values, perceptions, and opportunities. They have no fixed membership, but they have the ability to self-replicate, even across generational divides. All conflicts develop constituencies to one degree or another, but when powerful constituencies develop on both sides of the conflict, it creates a synergy which causes intractability. As the U.S.-Iranian relationship will demonstrate, the mechanisms which drive this process can be identified and observed. Intractability is never permanent, though. Because institutions are both constructed and deconstructed through this same set of mechanisms, this approach also promises important insights to the field of conflict resolution.

The application of institutional terminology to conflict analysis is not entirely new. The words "institution" and "institutionalized" are bandied about frequently in discussions of intractable conflicts, and even conflicts in general. However, there is a dearth of examination into what it really means for a conflict to be institutionalized, or the implications of such a statement. This dissertation will argue that a rigorous application of institutional theory offers an ideal lens for the study of intractable conflict. Institutions, by nature, are self-perpetuating systems in which components mutually reinforce a common purpose while interacting with their environment. They are not permanent, but they are sticky, sometimes remarkably so. Change usually happens gradually, and the forces that drive it often work unseen, evident only in glimpses provided by specific historical events. The fundamental question

of intractable conflict is why certain things stay the same in a changing world, even when the status quo no longer fits the new conditions – the very question that animates the study of institutions in the Social Sciences.

The framework for evaluating intractable conflict will derive from a school of thought known as Historical Institutionalism. Recognizing the reality of an ever-shifting world, this school views institutions in a constant state of evolution. Paradoxically, it is the mechanisms of change that actually serve as the engine of stability, and the force behind the perpetuation of a status quo (in this case, conflict). Historical Institutionalism reconciles the dichotomy between stasis and change using temporal analysis over broad swaths of history. Because intractable conflicts are recognized by their longevity, this process-tracing methodology is ideal, and it allows the user to gain insight into underlying dynamics often masked by other issues. This institutional approach to the study of intractable conflicts does not replace all other approaches, but as the following sections will show, it offers a new lens with unique explanatory power that provides a richer understanding.

This dissertation will explore the application of institutional theory to the study of intractable conflict with an in-depth case study of the U.S.-Iranian relationship between 1979 and 2018. The conflict between the U.S. and Iran is an ideal test case because it has spanned a full generational divide by any account, and some might argue a second, as well. Just as importantly, as the next section will elucidate, the level of sustained hostility between the U.S. and Iran over the course of four decades is a puzzle. Both sides have amassed legitimate grievances, but many authors believe that neither side has acted in its own national interest with regard to the other, according to realist standards. This is a conflict that stands in need of a fresh perspective. Additionally, unlike intractable conflicts between neighboring states, such as India and Pakistan, North and South Korea, or the Israelis and Palestinians, there are fewer compelling alternative explanations to mask the institutional forces under question. This dissertation asserts that institutional mechanisms work just as hard in other conflicts, but proximity

and competition over resources can overdetermine hostility and make these factors more difficult to isolate. Third, unlike shorter conflicts, four decades is a long enough period for institutional forces to reveal themselves.

The primary focus of the U.S.-Iran case study will be to highlight the institutional aspects of the conflict over a four-decade span. The upcoming literature review will provide an overview of the primary and secondary sources used to research this period. This work will provide considerable detail in some portions, but it is not intended to be a historical intervention. An institutional theory of conflict deals with wide swaths of history and should not depend on obscure facts or hidden gems. In fact, this dissertation contends that many authors have already been telling portions of the institutional story of this conflict without appreciating the broader implications of their work. The following chapters will simply provide a new framework for the narrative of this story.

The next section will set the stage for this case study by examining the intractable nature of the U.S.-Iranian conflict, using realism as a foil. It will then examine leading explanations for this state of intractability and explain why this puzzle stands in need of a new lens for analysis.

The Puzzle - 40 Years of Conflict Between the U.S. and Iran

For some, the enduring state of conflict between the U.S. and Iran may appear quite natural. After all, haven't U.S. headlines been filled, year after year, with stories about Iran's nefarious activities? And doesn't the Iranian media demonize the U.S., as well, referring to "global arrogance" and the "Great Satan?" At any moment in time, tit-for-tat exchanges of hostility might seem to explain the basis for the conflict very nicely. As this dissertation will show, however, aggression has not consistently been met with aggression, and overtures of peace have not cooled the conflict as one might expect. When viewing the relationship over a period of four decades, exchanges of malice fail to explain why the

conflict has endured in spite of the costs to both sides and clear benefits that might arise from a reduction in hostility. This section will use realism as a starting point for examining the relationship, and it will show that this conflict is a puzzle that begs further investigation.

Realism is rooted in the concept of power. Hans Morgenthau (1955, 8) defined power as, "anything that establishes and maintains control of man over man." States seek power, not just for its own sake, but because power is inextricably linked to the concept of "interest." Power is the means to control one's own destiny and fulfill the interests most important to the state. Kenneth Waltz (1979, Ch. 6), in his formulation of neorealism, argued that security is the primary interest of the state, and the anarchic condition of the international environment fuels insecurities that drive state conflict. Thus, balance of power is the overarching theory of international politics because states are naturally threatened by the relative power of other states. They will inevitably balance against greater threats by increasing their own power and capabilities or forming alliances with less threatening powers. Realism (both classical and neorealism) is more than just Machiavellian good advice about how states ought to act on the world stage. This school of thought purports to explain how states necessarily conduct themselves over the course of time. Therefore, deviations from this behavior are worth considering.

Using a realist perspective, there are three prominent reasons why a lasting conflict between the U.S. and Iran should be unlikely. The first is geography. The U.S. and Iran are on opposite sides of the earth. There is no possibility that Iran could invade the U.S., and even ranging American territory with standoff weapons would require an unlikely combination of asymmetric tactics that could be orchestrated more successfully by any number of potential actors besides Iran. On the other hand, U.S. force projection capabilities mean that it could invade Iran, if it so desired. However, Iran's major population centers are shielded by formidable mountains, deserts, marshlands, and vast expanses of terrain. Even air attacks would have to be planned and executed with great care. From a geographical

perspective alone, neither side has much cause for insecurity. Of course, the same observation could have been made for the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War, so this alone is insufficient.

The second reason is relative power. President Trump (Rouhi 2019) summarized this point nicely in a warning that he tweeted to Iran's leaders, where he reminded them that the U.S. is "by far the most powerful Military Force [sic] in the world, with 1.5 Trillion Dollars" (invested over the past two years). This compared with Iran's $13.2 billion in military investment from 2018. Even Iran's regional neighbors Saudi Arabia and Israel outspent it by considerable sums. This relative power disparity calls into question why the world's leading superpower would choose to balance against a country like Iran, or, on the other hand, why Iran would choose to pick a fight with the world's strongest military power.

The third reason is that both the U.S. and Iran have far more pressing threats to focus on than each other. The U.S. has faced a resurgent Russia and an ascendant China, both of which are nuclear powers directly challenging U.S. supremacy in a number of fronts on the world stage. The "pivot to Asia" announced under the Obama administration reflected an acknowledgement of changing world conditions, but this policy has been stymied by the attention that the U.S. continues to focus on Iran. Vali Nasr (2013, 119-122) argued that the Obama administration sacrificed its strategic leverage vis-a-vis China and Russia to garner support for sanctions over Iran's nuclear program, and this trend only continued under President Trump. *The Washington Post* (Editorial Board 2020) touted China as the only clear winner in Trump's "maximum pressure campaign" against Iran. Terrorism also remains a perennial threat, but after the 1980's the most deadly and damaging terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its interests were perpetrated by Sunni extremists, not Iranian-sponsored Shiite groups.

The Iranians, for their part, have always lived in a tough neighborhood. Memories of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980's have lingered, making it little wonder that they would devote so much effort to shaping their former adversary during the U.S. occupation. Iran has been locked in a continued state of

tension with Israel and Saudi Arabia, and at least three of its immediately adjacent neighbors have been internally unstable for the entire duration of the conflict with the U.S. The former Shah chose to partner with the U.S. as a means of balancing against his potential adversaries, a very realist position. Realism has difficulty explaining why the rulers of the Islamic Republic would choose the opposite approach and isolate themselves so consistently.

In fact, prominent realist authors have argued against the U.S. position in the Middle East, including with regard to Iran. Paul Pillar (2016) wrote specifically about the U.S. relationship with Iran, explaining that the Iranian threat did not warrant the level of attention that the U.S. had focused on it (even accounting for the nuclear issue, which will be discussed further). Barry Posen (2014) argued that the U.S. cannot afford to be the world's policeman. It should pull ground forces out of regions like the Middle East, allow the areas to reach their own natural balance of power, and deal with the new order that emerges. John Mearsheimer (2018) made a similar argument that the U.S. preoccupation with the Middle East was a costly distraction from more important priorities. Steven Walt (2018) went as far as to claim that this misguided focus was threatening the U.S. its position of leadership in the world. The following discussion will examine interests on both sides of the conflict and make the case that realism, with its rational choice perspective, cannot explain why the U.S. and Iran should have been enemies for 40 years.

U.S. interests

Oil

One of the first places one might look in relating U.S. national interests to Iran is energy security, or oil markets, to be more specific. Bacevich (2016, 3-27) explained that by the 1970's, the American way of life had come to be defined largely by a culture of freedom that depended on gasoline-powered

motor vehicles. As the U.S. imported greater and greater quantities, especially from the Middle East, the country developed a new sense of vulnerability. This reached a crescendo in the 1970's leading to the "Carter Doctrine," and the combination of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 entrenched this policy for succeeding administrations. President Jimmy Carter (Painter 2012) summarized the doctrine that would bear his name on January 23, 1980 in an address to Congress, stating that, "An attempt by any outside power to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." To this effect, both Carter and Reagan would bolster U.S. forces in the Middle East, leading eventually to the establishment of U.S. Central Command.

It is clear that concerns over energy security helped shape the conflict between the U.S. and Iran from the very beginning. But did this continue over time? According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2019), between 1950 and 2005, U.S. net petroleum imports (imports minus exports) generally increased to a peak of just over 60 percent, when the trend reversed. After this point, however, this figure steadily declined to a mere 11 percent of total consumption in 2018, the lowest figure since 1957. While the demand for oil imports is driven by a complicated array of economic factors, the increase in domestic production (along with decreases in consumption) has made a significant contribution to this shift. Also, worth considering, the percentage of U.S. oil imports originating from OPEC countries has fallen from a 1977 peak of approximately 70 percent to around 29 percent in 2018. In 2018, the U.S. imported over four times as much oil from Canada as from Saudi Arabia. Per Klare (2007, 38-42) both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations placed significant priority on the global diversification of oil supplies, expanding support for oil production in the Caspian Sea region, Africa, and South America. If the U.S. depended on the Middle East for oil in the 1970's and 1980's, this markedly decreased over the following decades.

Has the U.S. ever been truly dependent on the Middle East for oil? Energy analysts Gal Luft and Anne Korin (2013) pointed out that at no point in history did the amount of U.S. oil imported from the Middle East ever exceed 15 percent of consumption, but this was never a driver dependence in the first place. Oil is fungible, meaning that its origin matters little to price or availability. Further, the de facto U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia (Pierce 2012, 92-96) (Kemp 2016) has helped to stabilize U.S. oil markets and undercut Iran's power to manipulate them. Perhaps the greatest concern with regard to Iran and global energy security is the Strait of Hormuz, through which 21 percent of the world's petroleum products still transited in 2018 (Energy Information Administration 2019), only a fraction of which could have been routed by other means. Iran has a long history of threatening to close the straits in response to tensions with the U.S., demonstrated anew in a 2019 rhetorical exchange with President Trump (Wilkie 2019). However, assessments of Iranian capability (Katzman, et al. 2012) have consistently shown that blocking this waterway is no small feat. At most, Iran could likely impede traffic for a short time, at great cost to itself.

How much do concerns about protecting global oil supply really drive the U.S. conflict with Iran today? Given the U.S. willingness to sanction Iran's oil exports, the answer appears to be – not much. According to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo (Pamuk and Chiacu, 2019), as of August 2019, U.S. sanctions were removing almost 2.7 million barrels of oil per day from Iran's exports. While other producers like Saudi Arabia have been able to increase production to make up for the loss, the U.S. has demonstrated a surprising willingness to strain global oil markets in order to punish Iran. Some analysts (Leverett and Leverett 2013, 6) have gone as far as to cite U.S. determination to keep Iran in a subordinate position as the source of the greatest risk to the security of the market for Gulf oil. On balance, the conflict between the U.S. and Iran appears to have played out in spite of any national interest in energy security instead of because of it.

Terrorism

Another area in which Iran is often accused of violating the U.S. national interest is in its support for terrorism. Iran's support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas is well documented, and this dissertation makes no apology for terror, especially in the form of indiscriminate attacks against civilian targets. The question is not whether specific acts have warranted retaliation, but whether Iran's pattern of behavior over the course of time has demonstrated a fundamental threat to U.S. national security. Is Iran so dangerous that a global superpower on the other side of the world should consistently focus its foreign policy on balancing against it, to the detriment of other priorities and threats?

Iran's most brazen attacks against the U.S. mainly occurred in 1980's Lebanon. In April 1983 (History 2019), a suicide bomber from an Iranian-sponsored group attacked the U.S. Embassy, killing 63, including 17 Americans. In October, a larger attack targeted two barracks facilities, killing 241 U.S. and 58 French servicemembers. In September of the next year (Kifner 1984), these militias bombed the U.S. Embassy Annex, killing 23, including two Americans. Iran was also complicit (Binder 1991) with these same groups in taking and holding a number of Americans hostage throughout the decade, including C.I.A. Station Chief William Buckley, who died under torture by his captors. While, for many, these constituted unforgiveable acts of aggression, the historical context of this period is important to consider. The U.S. had imposed sanctions on Iran and was starting to support Iran's enemy, Iraq, with a greater degree of openness in the Iran-Iraq War. They were also leading the international community in turning a blind eye toward Saddam Hussein's introduction of chemical weapons into the conflict (Gibson 2010, 90-120). With regard to Lebanon, the Reagan administration ultimately discovered an insoluble quagmire of political interests and chose to withdraw U.S. troops.

Iran's headline attack against U.S. personnel in the 1990's was the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia, which housed military servicemembers, killing 19 and wounding 500

more (Hegghammer 2008). After subsequent investigation, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia officially blamed Iran for the attack, but the findings have been disputed for years, as some continue to believe this was actually carried out by Sunni groups that Saudi Arabia chose to protect. Assuming that Iran did sponsor the attack, their motive is also unclear, and this will be discussed again later in the dissertation. Iran's most damaging campaign against the U.S. occurred throughout the occupation of Iraq. The U.S. Army's official history of the Iraq War (Rayburn, et al., vol. 2, 2019, 222-227) explained how Iran conducted an extensive proxy war against U.S. and coalition forces throughout the occupation, primarily using Shiite militia groups and inflicting an estimated 603 casualties (Rempfer 2019). Again, without excusing Iran's actions, it should be noted that Iran had considerable interests of its own in the fate of their next-door neighbor and former enemy Iraq, and the U.S. explicitly shunned these interests. In many ways, Iran's shadow war was not unlike the U.S. campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Another point of perspective should be considered when determining the threat that Iran poses to U.S. national security. Blood may cry for justice, but as realists would predict, this is often suppressed in the name of national interest. One prominent example occurred in 1967 (Roberts, 2019) when Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats attacked the USS Liberty, killing 34 and wounding 174 sailors. Whether this was intentional or not remains a matter of debate, but the Johnson administration covered up the incident, threatening sailors with punishment if they spoke about it openly. Another happened in 1987 (Zatarain 2008, 7-25) when an Iraq jet fired two anti-ship missiles at the USS Stark, ultimately killing 37 sailors and badly damaging the ship. Instead of holding Iraq accountable, the Reagan administration used the incident to inaugurate a "tanker war" with Iran.

To this effect, Iranian blood cries out as well, as the U.S. killed a number of Iranian sailors in direct fire engagements during the tanker war in the Persian Gulf. More importantly (Fisher 2013), Iran has not forgotten the 1988 shootdown of Iran Air Flight 655 which killed 290 civilians. Although the U.S. paid reparations to the families, U.S. leadership, especially President George H.W. Bush, refused to

apologize for the incident. Iran (Erdbrink 2019) has also suffered from terrorist attacks and assassinations throughout the previous decades on its own soil, some of which it attributes (rightly or wrongly) to the U.S., Israel, and the Mojahedin-e Khalq, a dissident group which receives considerable support from the U.S. If terrorism is Iran's primary weapon, one could also argue they have used it with some restraint by eschewing attacks on U.S. soil (with the exception of a bizarre and ham-handed plot to kill the Saudi Arabian Ambassador in 2011).

Jefferson Morley (2019), contributor to *The New Republic*, investigated claims by leading U.S. officials and counterterrorism experts that Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was responsible for terrorist attacks that had killed Americans. His finding was that the U.S. government continues to use 1980's Lebanon and the Iraq War as the basis for its accusations, while Sunni-affiliated groups have been far more dangerous since that time. Morley's point was not was not to let Iran off of the hook, but to show that official rhetoric on the U.S. side insinuates more than it delivers.

Further complicating the issue, the term "terrorism" has been broadly expanded in the U.S. political lexicon to cover all forms of political violence that the U.S. selectively chooses to condemn. President Trump's (The White House, 2019) 2019 designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization provides a case in point. Reports suggesting that Iran has increased its support for terrorism (Iran's Support for Terrorism Worldwide 2014) conflate the term with support for Assad's regime in Syria and support for Houthi insurgents in Yemen. One comparison is especially telling. U.S. officials (U.S. Department of State 2018) like Special Representative Brian Hook have been quick to point to incidents such as a foiled assassination plot against an Iranian dissident in Denmark in late 2018 as examples of the threat that Iran poses as a terrorist actor. However, when Saudi officials murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi in an embassy building in Istanbul less than one month earlier, President Trump publicly brushed the incident under the rug (Herszenhorn 2019).

Israel

The country that has arguably borne the brunt of Iranian support for terrorism or proxy groups is Israel. While Hezbollah has been Iran's chief proxy in the conflict between Israel and its adversaries, Iran has even crossed the confessional divide and supported Sunni groups like Hamas, as well (Levitt 2006, 6, 86). Regardless of the actual level of Iran's involvement in specific attacks, its complicity with these groups has tied it, to some degree, to most of the violence Israel has experienced since the 1990's. The U.S. has long considered Israel its ally and partner in the Middle East, and some Americans (including not a few lawmakers) conclude the matter at this point, arguing that any threat to Israel automatically qualifies as a threat to U.S. national interests. Realists, however, take a different view of Middle East politics.

To begin with, is Iran is truly an existential threat to the state of Israel? The corpus of Iranian rhetoric (Kessler 2011) includes the chant, "Death to Israel," and radical Iranian leaders such as former President Ahmadinejad have been notoriously quoted (out of context in his case) as calling for Israel's destruction. Threats of violence should never be discounted, but a more detailed examination of statements by Iran's most prominent leaders, including Khomeini himself, reveal that their ideological issue is not with the Jewish people but with the Zionist project. Antisemitism has been an issue at various historical periods in Iran (Amirpur 2012), but it is not a fixture of Iranian society, and Iran retains a small but loyal Jewish minority within the country. Iranian policy has opposed the state of Israel since the inception of the Islamic Republic, but until Iran was excluded from the 1991 Madrid Conference (Haas 2019), most of this opposition was rhetorical. Only when it saw its regional influence threatened did it expand its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon into a larger proxy war against Israel. As this dissertation will show, none of Iran's rhetoric (or even its creation of Hezbollah) in the 1980's stopped Israel from blatantly supporting it throughout the Iran-Iraq War. The difficulty with rhetoric is that one can never completely discount the threats that it carries. However, in spite of proclamations of "death"

to both the U.S. and Israel, there is little evidence to suggest that Iran's leaders have ever been willing to openly confront either foe in a direct manner.

Assuming that Iranian leaders were serious about destroying Israel, could they do it? The possibility of nuclear weapons aside (to be discussed in the next section), the answer is almost certainly, no. Iran is not geographically contiguous to Israel, and it has little force projection capability. Its military is primarily a defensive force (Chubin 2014, 79) (Cordesman 2015), and while it might prove adept at defending Iranian territory, it is poorly equipped in modern terms and has been stunted by years of sanctions. Lacking conventional power, it has turned to asymmetric warfare and ballistic missiles as the cornerstones of its military power. Iran's best option would be to use Hezbollah, and while these forces showed well from a defensive standpoint in 2006 (Harel and Isacharoff 2008, 251-258), their offensive capability proved no match for Israeli forces. They paid a high price for openly engaging Israel, and any claim on victory was pyrrhic at best. Hezbollah undoubtedly has a large number of missiles that can range Israeli territory, but this was true in the 2006 campaign as well. With Israel's superior ground force and total control of the air, missile attacks were relatively limited in their effectiveness. If Iran were to attack Israel, it would also find few allies, whereas Israel might quickly garner international support.

Israel, on the other hand, has a state-of-the-art military. Not only does it possess the most advanced warplanes available from the U.S. and Western firms, boasting stealth technology and the ability to range Iranian territory, but it also has the indigenous technological base to upgrade these aircraft further according to its own needs (Farley 2019). Israel has its own array of ballistic and cruise missiles, some of which can range any part of Iran (Missile Defense Project 2018). Additionally, Israel is developing a sophisticated ballistic missile defense shield with U.S. support (Williams 2019). On the seas, Israel boasts a small, but formidable Navy, and its submarines can launch missiles (Boring 2019). Israeli land forces, while significantly smaller in number than those of Iran, have been seasoned by

numerous wars and skirmishes. Finally, Israel's intelligence and military forces have a strong track record for monitoring and countering the capabilities of both Hezbollah and Hamas.

Could U.S. hostility toward Iran actually be making Israel's security situation worse? The principle behind the U.S. acting as an outside "balancer" within the Middle East is not inconsistent with realism, provided this balancing is required. However, in the case of Iran, not only does Israel vastly overmatch them, but so do some of its Arab neighbors, as well. In 2018, Iran spent $13.2 billion on its military, as opposed to Saudi Arabia's $67.6 billion, and even the UAE, which spent $22.8 billion in 2014 (the latest accurate figures available). Even tiny Qatar spent $1.9 billion in 2010, and apparently a higher figure in the following years (Wezeman and Kuimova 2019). Perhaps even more threatening in the long run, Iraq is rebuilding itself with U.S. assistance. Each of these countries have access to U.S. and other Western weaponry and training. It is widely understood that Iran's emphasis on asymmetric warfare and missile capabilities is largely a product of its own attempt at balancing. Realists like Barry Posen (2014) have argued that the U.S. should take a hands-off approach and allow the Middle East to develop a natural balance of power. By realist logic, the U.S. may be tipping the scales too far, all but necessitating a military buildup by Iran. Mahsa Rouhi (2019) made the argument in a *Foreign Policy* article that the U.S. might be wise to actually help facilitate the growth of Iran's conventional forces, decreasing their sense of insecurity and turning their attention from ballistic missiles and proxy warfare.

A final danger of tipping the scales too far with regard to Israel is danger of enabling what *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (2010) referred to as "driving drunk in Jerusalem." His point was that writing a blank check of support to Israel allowed them to continue building settlements and ensured that the Palestinian questions would never be settled fairly or peacefully. This same principle could apply to international relations, as well, though. By providing too much support to Israel, it allows them to stoke the fires with rivals like Iran instead of encouraging them to find more a more constructive approach.

Iran is certainly a threat to Israel. Ideology aside, realism suggests that these two powers should naturally compete for regional influence and balance against each other. While the nature and scope of Iran's threat is up for debate, though, there is little indication that it has either the capability or the intention to carry through on threats to destroy Israel. A U.S. policy of support for Israel does not require direct intervention in this conflict, nor does is necessitate an active posture of hostility against Iran.

Nuclear Weapons

Perhaps the most high-profile explanation for U.S. hostility against Iran in recent years has been its development of a nuclear program with the potential to eventually produce nuclear weapons. Iranian leaders have consistently denied any intention of weaponizing its nuclear program, but until the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (JPCOA) in 2015, neither did it express any willingness to accept constraints. President Trump's revocation of the JPCOA in 2018 quickly reversed this position (Kerr and Katzman 2018, 25-27). The issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program fill countless books and articles that far exceed the scope of this work, and this paper will not dispute that limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons is generally in the national interest of the United States. The question at hand is whether, for realists, the nuclear issue necessitates consistent U.S. hostility toward Iran.

The first question to ask is whether Iran, in principle, can actually be stopped from developing nuclear weapons at any reasonable cost. The examples provided by Pakistan and North Korea, both of which clandestinely developed nuclear weapons in collaboration with each other, suggest that determined actors with some level of access to state resources will eventually prevail. The scientific knowledge required is unchanging and increasingly available. Technological advances in other fields

create synergistic possibilities that increasingly favor aspiring entrants to the nuclear club. President Obama was criticized for signing a deal with a lifespan of only 10 years, but his decision clearly reflected a view that delaying the inevitable was the best outcome that could be realistically achieved. It would not be impossible to Iran's progress, but the cost would apparently be very high. To decide whether it might be worth it, one must consider the threat that a nuclear Iran would pose to the U.S.

Kenneth Waltz (Sagan and Waltz 2003, 3-45), the founding father of neorealism, famously went on record advocating the proliferation of nuclear weapons as a positive. He believed that these weapons were essentially unusable in an offensive manner, but they would have the effect of reducing insecurity for states like Iran. In a manner reminiscent of the maxim that *an armed society is a polite society*, Waltz believed that nuclear weapons would encourage responsible behavior by raising the price of belligerent behavior to an unacceptable level, but also obviating its need for defensive purposes. From Waltz's perspective, allowing Iran to acquire nuclear weapons would cause it to act more like a normal state. With regard to Israel's nuclear weapons, Iran would feel less threatened, but it would also be deterred. Waltz would likely point to the example of North Korea, which geographically neighbors its key rival but has not remarkably increased its threat posture against it since developing nuclear weapons, as a case in his point. Waltz's position did not go uncontested, though.

Steven David (1995) argued that, while having nuclear weapons might make some states more responsible, this must be judged on a case-by-case basis. The prospect that states will become more rational requires the assumption that each state shares the same version of rationality, which they do not. The specific concern that David's position reflects is that states like Iran are governed by radical ideologies that could lead to dangerous or unpredictable decisions that defy Western conceptions of risk calculation. With regard to North Korean example, they might behave today, but who knows about tomorrow? Further, David (2013) contended that even rational Iranian leaders might find utility in employing nuclear weapons if the ruling regime were directly threatened. Leaders prone to losing their

grip on power might behave in a manner that would otherwise appear erratic, and Iran's stability has been in question since 1979. Either scenario is certainly possible, and Iran is often accused of such forms of "irrationality." On the other hand, observers like Paul Pillar (2016) argue that the Islamic Republic has demonstrated a high degree of rationality throughout its existence, within the framework of its own interest. In spite of its blustering and brinksmanship, Iran has often been quite restrained when confronted with a direct threat. At the state level, it certainly has not exhibited suicidal tendencies.

In principle, any state (save one's own) armed with nuclear weapons constitutes an existential threat to the others, not least of all Iran. In practice, U.S. behavior has not suggested that most Americans view Iran this way. It is readily apparent that the cost of preventing a nuclear Iran by coercion would almost certainly be military action, and even this might not achieve a lasting result. In spite of considerable drum beating by lawmakers and pundits, the U.S. (since the 1980's) has yet to come even close to realizing this option. This suggests that policymakers not really considered Iran an existential threat (to the U.S. or Israel). In fact, one of the keys to the Obama administration's success (Cornwell 2015) in overcoming domestic opposition to the JPCOA was framing the deal as a choice between negotiation and war. Obama correctly surmised that the U.S. population was not willing to attack Iran over its nuclear program. Additionally, while many certainly disagreed with the JPCOA, the Trump administration scuttled a deal that was apparently successful in containing Iran's nuclear ambitions (for the time being) in protest over other nefarious activities in the Middle East that very clearly did not pose an existential threat to the U.S., or even Israel for that matter. In essence, the U.S. was willing to take the risk on a nuclear Iran in order to ratchet up tensions over a host of other, less important grievances. This is hard to explain with realism.

The key issue is not whether Iran's nuclear program is actually an existential threat, but what U.S. behavior indicates that it believes. If the U.S. were to treat Iran's nuclear program like a matter of

national survival, worth making major sacrifices to prevent, then at least in this category, realism might present a more convincing argument. Of course, President Trump's overtures to North Korea, another menacing power already in possession of nuclear weapons, would then become more puzzling. As it stands, the U.S.-Iranian conflict still requires another explanation.

Threats to regional stability

A final category must be considered in order to rule out realism as a decisive explanation for U.S. animosity toward Iran. Over the course of the conflict, perhaps accelerating throughout the 2010's, Iran has demonstrated a thirst for regional influence. Lacking conventional options for asserting itself, it has expanded on the model (and the platform) it developed with Lebanese Hezbollah and focused on asserting itself through asymmetric means, primarily through Shiite proxies. This has manifested itself most prominently in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and (only more recently) in Afghanistan. Tensions have occasionally flared with Saudi Arabia, as well, particularly in 2019 (Pamuk 2019) when an Iran struck an oil processing facility from an armed drone. General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of U.S. Central Command, echoed his predecessors in June 2020 (Vergun 2020) by calling Iran the "greatest threat to regional security and stability."

The question of U.S. national interests in the greater Middle East is both complex and hotly contested. Few would argue that the U.S. has any strong interest in Yemen, except for preventing Sunni terrorists from operating out of the country, and Iran is backing Shiites proxies with no love for Al Qaeda. The Obama administration's policy decisions with regard to Syria served to reinforce the argument that the U.S. has few interests in that country either, save the campaign against the Islamic State, which Iran supports. Iraq is more complicated, but the U.S. had withdrawn combat troops before the rise of the Islamic State. Iran deserves a great deal of the credit for saving Baghdad and reversing

this tide. With regard to Iranian influence in the country, the U.S. Army's official history of the Iraq War (Rayburn, et al. 2019b) concluded that the U.S., itself, had largely facilitated Iran's gains. If history is any guide, Iraqis will not long brook this level of Iranian manipulation after the U.S. leaves again, which could be soon. Finally, in Afghanistan, Iran extends its interest through a long-oppressed Shiite minority with little expectation of significantly shaping Afghan politics. The U.S. has been attempting to leave Afghanistan for nearly two decades, and President Trump promised to finish this process.

On the other hand, Iranian actions certainly threaten the status quo. Iran is competing against the Gulf Arab States, Israel and Turkey, all generally aligned with the U.S., to foist its vision on the region. Realism has no problem explaining competition between neighboring states. The difficulty is ascertaining the core U.S. interests in the region and explaining how the current strategic alignment supports those interests in a productive manner. Realist Critics such as Posen (2014) and Bacevich (2016) argue that this alignment is an artifact of days gone by, and the U.S. is wasting inordinate resources attempting to impose a regional order that, if it ever served U.S. interests, no longer does. If this is the case, then Iran's threat to "security and stability" is entirely subjective. This does not excuse Iran's behavior in any particular case, but it calls into question the U.S. motives for expending significant resources on their account. Regardless, this topic illustrates the point made previously in the discussion over the definition of intractable conflict. One of the common characteristics of intractable conflict is that justifications driving the conflict become noticeably complicated, debatable, and potentially suspect in the court of public opinion.

This dissertation will also argue that the U.S.-led regional order in the Middle East is an institution, itself. The alignment of this institution has made it virtually impossible for the U.S. to entertain a more productive relationship with Iran because instead of leading its clients, the U.S. has become trapped by their individual interest calculations. Like any institution, this regional order has proven sticky, and while conditions have changed around it, this institution has perpetuated ossified

values and worldviews. As Chapter 2 will explain in more depth, this has contributed to the intractability of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Again, this does not excuse Iranian behavior, but it highlights a lack of strategic vision on the part of the U.S., where policymakers agree on the goal of preventing Iranian influence but little else in terms of a realistic positive endstate for the region.

Iranian interest - What does Iran have to gain by picking fights with the U.S?

That Iran would feel threatened by the U.S. is fully supported by realism. U.S. sponsorship of the coup against Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and subsequent patronage of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi gave Iranians a plausible concern that the U.S. might intervene directly in the Iran's revolution from the very beginning of the Islamic Republic. This has contributed to a lasting sense of insecurity among Iran's rulers, especially as this new regime has struggled to establish its own legitimacy. U.S. calls for regime change (implicitly but thinly veiled), throughout the years have only exacerbated this perception (Landler 2019). The Carter doctrine, subsequently carried out by President Reagan, increased the U.S. presence and involvement throughout the Persian Gulf Region. Two wars in Iraq, and one in Afghanistan have not only bolstered the U.S. presence in the region but hemmed Iran on two sides. U.S. sanctions against Iran have damaged and even potentially crippled Iran's economy, at times. Finally, Iran's bellicosity against Israel has solidified a hostile relationship with what is arguably the region's most powerful actor, and U.S. support for Israel has only fueled the sense of threat.

While it may appear natural for Iran to feel threatened by the U.S., what realism cannot so easily explain is Iran's reaction to this perceived threat. From the time of the embassy takeover in 1979, Iran appears to have relished any opportunity to jab the U.S. in the eye. Whether through fiery rhetoric, terrorism against the U.S. and Israel, attempts to undermine peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, or proxy wars against the U.S. and its Gulf allies, Iran has consistently provoked conflict and

made it easy for the U.S. to paint them as a bad actor on the world stage. George H. W. Bush offered Iran that "goodwill begets goodwill" (Dowd 1989b). This is a subjective term, and U.S. has not always honored the spirit of this promise. Iran, however, seems almost deliberately to have chosen its path of international isolation and pariah status.

If Iran truly considers the U.S. its greatest external threat, realism suggests that it would be courting allies to balance against this threat instead of isolating itself. One could make the argument that Iran's relationship with Venezuela, strong since the early 1980's, and other non-aligned countries have been attempts to do exactly this. However, these relationships have offered Iran little tangible benefit and appear to be little more than symbolic gestures, designed primarily to boost morale at home by making Iran look like it plays a global role. Iran's relationship with North Korea has been entirely transactional, and while this has helped to secure some weapons and technology, it does not appear to have bolstered its position within the region. Iran's most important alliance has been with Syria, a fellow pariah in the Middle East. This partnership, especially in the development and control of Hezbollah, has facilitated Iran's access to Lebanon and an avenue through which to credibly oppose Israel. Syria has been the main beneficiary in this relationship, benefiting from Iran's largesse while Iran has attempted to expand its influence. None of these relationships has bolstered Iran against U.S. interference, and most have antagonized its foe to some degree.

While it is true that Iran has derived certain tactical benefits from a limited array of partnerships, this pattern seems to represent a dearth of strategic thinking. If Iran's actions reflect an aspiration to regional dominance or hegemony, realism would predict an approach more like that of the former Shah – courting favor with the U.S. in order to undercut support for regional rivals and reduce the role that America plays as an external balancer. Instead, Iran has played the provocateur, incessantly looking for opportunities to stir trouble within neighboring countries. Rather than deriving a

benefit from these actions, they have effectively driven their adversaries into the arms of the U.S. and increased their own isolation.

One could argue (as did Takeyh 2012) that it has always been in the interest of the Islamic Republic, especially its leadership, to have an external enemy, in order to unify the population and distract them from domestic grievances. There is almost certainly merit to this argument, but this also challenges the realist worldview, which sees states as unitary actors with a coherent set of interests. This chapter will discuss theories that allow for a bifurcation of interest between the population and the leadership at a later point. In the meantime, assuming a broad need for an external enemy might explain certain decisions during certain periods, but it cannot cover four decades, and it cannot answer the question – why the U.S? Iran had an external enemy in Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980's who was also an enemy of both the U.S. and Israel. Would not an olive leaf toward the U.S. have helped ensure, if nothing else, that the Western world would have enforced their stated neutrality and refrained from supporting Iraq?

Ultimately, the Iranian case for hostility against the U.S. is even weaker in light of realism than the other way around. Debatable though they are, the U.S. can point to definable interests as a justification for its policies in opposition to Tehran. Iran, on the other hand leans primarily on ideological arguments and historical narratives that simply do not fit the interest-based framework of realism. It is worth noting, however, that realism is an inherently Western concept. Neorealism in particular (rooted in the works of Kenneth Waltz), is anchored in a materialist worldview that assumes the modern nation-state system as a universal norm. A discussion of Iranian views with respect to the concept of realism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it suffices to observe that Iranian leaders have rarely been compelled to articulate their national interests in a format compatible with Western sensibilities. In any regard, Iran's belligerence has acted like a self-fulfilling prophecy, increasing U.S.

opposition against it without attracting significant support for its cause. Such behavior would be puzzling in any culture or society.

Cost of the conflict to the U.S.

The cost of the U.S. conflict with Iran is difficult to accurately quantify. Military deployments, including land, air, and naval forces are very expensive, but it is almost impossible to parse out a percentage that should be attributed directly to Iran. Most deployments serve multiple priorities, some are classified, and there is also a considerable sunk cost to account for (the same ships and aircraft would be operating somewhere else if not the Middle East). You can measure the number servicemembers lost, but especially in Lebanon and Iraq, it was indigenous forces that primarily engaged U.S. troops. They might have been less effective without Iranian support, but some of the same attacks would probably have happened regardless. You can also measure the amount of military assistance provided to regional allies who help balance against Iran, but again, this reflects multiple agendas.

Economic sanctions have been a key part of the U.S. policy toward Iran, though, and their effects are easier to estimate empirically. Most studies regarding sanctions focus on the impact to the target country. The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) (Leslie, et al. 2014, 3), however, examined the cost to the U.S. of its sanctions on Iran, specifically focused on lost export revenue. In their assessment, between 1995 and 2012 alone, the U.S. sacrificed between $134.7 and $173.5 billion dollars in trade that never took place, and because the Iranian economy would have been healthier, these numbers could have been considerably higher in reality. Further, this trade would have resulted in between 51,043 and 66,436 additional jobs each year for the U.S. While the model used by this report is only one method for estimating the cost of sanctions to the U.S. economy, and the numbers can always

be disputed, the fact remains that long-term economic sanctions have been more costly for the U.S. to wield than commonly advertised.

Another disturbing cost of the protracted use of economic sanctions against Iran is the likelihood that their use will weaken U.S. position centrality within the global economy. As pointed out by Gjoza (2019), the U.S. benefits tremendously from the status of the dollar as a universal reserve currency, and it also controls the levers of the international banking apparatus that allows those dollars to move. The U.S. has applied sanctions to entities in dozens of countries around the world, and the effectiveness of sanctions designed to target Iran have been particularly worrying to friends and allies alike. This has prompted a number of powerful nations, especially China, but also increasingly European across Europe, to begin developing alternative financial systems that reduce their dependence on the U.S. These efforts are still nascent, but they have the potential to vastly reduce the economic freedom of action that U.S. has come to take for granted.

Perhaps the greatest costs to the U.S. of sustaining this conflict with Iran are actually the ones most subjective, opportunity costs. These costs are better described than estimated empirically. From an economic standpoint, lost revenue aside, Iran offers tremendous investment opportunities. Their commercial aviation system has been antiquated and crumbling for years. With many of Iran's airframes originally built by Boeing, this corporation has long eyed Iran as a prime investment opportunity. After the JPCOA, Boeing signed a $17 billion deal with Iran, but this was subsequently scrapped as the Trump administration re-imposed sanctions in 2018 (Mufson 2018). Iran's ground transportation networks have been similarly challenged, although recent advances such as the underground metro system in Tehran, have benefitted Chinese corporations instead American (TCA 2019).

From a diplomatic standpoint, America's row with Iran has consumed a tremendous amount of symbolic capital and goodwill. Aside from the constant effort required to threaten and cajole existing NATO allies (at the cost of undermining the original purpose for the alliance), the U.S. has been forced to court Russia and China for favors in supporting its initiatives against Iran. Realists would argue that these are the countries that the U.S. should be balancing against instead, and currying favors to help punish Iran is a distraction. Finally, in staking its position against Iran, the U.S. has committed itself to sometimes unsavory alliances with actors like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, removing a degree of strategic flexibility to pursue other interests.

When looking at opportunity costs, one should also consider some counterfactuals. What if the U.S. had partnered with Iran during its operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria instead of fighting against the grain to counter Iranian influence? Certainly, in Iraq, the number of casualties would have been lower. One could argue that increased Iranian influence would have turned Iraq into an Iranian client state. However, the U.S. Army's official history of Iraq (Rayburn, et al. 2019b) concluded that this largely happened anyway. Further, the rate limitation on effective Iranian power in Iraq has not been U.S. action, but instead, the sentiments of the Iraqis themselves (such Moqtada Al Sadr, who has both accepted Iranian largess and yet often held Iran at arm's length).

In Afghanistan, the U.S. could have used Iran as a counterweight to Pakistani interference. The Iranians have long accepted that their own influence among the unruly Afghan tribes is limited, but their understanding of Afghan politics probably exceeds that of the U.S. In Syria, the U.S. and Iran tacitly cooperated toward a common enemy, the (so called) Islamic State. What benefits could open cooperation have provided? Another important place to consider counterfactual analysis is with regard to Iran's nuclear program. If the U.S. had chosen to offer carrots instead of sticks, the U.S. might have provided very appealing incentives for Iran to place its nuclear program under international

accountability from an early stage, while still keeping the cost of these inducements far lower than the eventual costs of punishment and conflict.

Cost of the conflict to Iran

Iran has borne a direct cost for its belligerency toward the U.S. from the earliest days of the Islamic Republic. Economic sanctions have been the most consistent and ever-present reminders of this price through the years, although varying in scope and form. The most studied period of sanctions occurred between 2011 and the present (with a partial respite in 2016 and 2017 because of the JPCOA), when the U.S. successfully pressured the international community to isolate Iran economically. Per the Congressional Research Service (Katzman 2019, 61-65), sanctions have hobbled Iran's economy by 15-20 percent per year, fostered an unemployment rate around 20 percent, spurred inflation as high as 60 percent, and decimated the value of Iran's currency. Iran has the second largest proven oil reserve in the world, but export restrictions between 2018 and the first half of 2019 limited Iranian oil output to 350,000 barrels per day and cost the country an estimated $50 billion dollars over the 2017 figure (when oil flowed unimpeded). Iranian access the currency reserves it needs to conduct oil transactions has been limited or denied, and perhaps most damaging in the long run, Iran has not been able to garner the investment that its oil industry needs to maintain production levels in future years. This economic damage and the lack of access to imported goods has impacted most areas of Iran's economy including manufacturing, banking, and transportation, especially commercial aviation (Nadimi 2019).

Does this mean that Iran is a basket case because of its propensity for conflict? Some headlines have suggested this as the case when focusing on sensational figures or incidents of unrest. However, Iran has also developed an extensive and ever-expanding array of coping mechanism for dealing with the sanctions. This has included (Katzman 2019, 62-63) export diversification, import substitution,

partial privatization of economic interests, subsidy reductions, import restrictions, and currency controls. Harris (2017) points out that, since the revolution, not only has Iran maintained a rate of growth consistent with many other developing nations, but it has also developed an impressive and effective welfare state, education system, and healthcare sector. Iran's economy has suffered from a number of ills since 1979, and both the sanctions and isolation resulting from its conflict with the U.S. have played a role in this. But as even Katzman (2019, summary) acknowledged, sanctions have not brought the country to its knees or altered its behavior.

In gauging the real cost of the conflict to Iran, one must turn again to counterfactuals. With the world's second largest proven oil reserves, what could Iran look like today if it had chosen a more cooperative path? Certainly, if Iran has been able to scrape out middle-of-the-road status as a developing nation in spite of its international isolation, the massive revenues it has sacrificed could only have helped propel it far beyond this meager state of existence. With proper investment, its oil output might rival Saudi Arabia by now. If Iran had normalized relations with the outside world from the beginning of its revolution, it may have had access to Western technology and support, potentially shortening the Iran-Iraq War in its favor. Much as the former Shah achieved de facto hegemony in the Persian Gulf, Iran's current rulers might be realizing their apparent dreams of great power status, supported by, instead of contested by the Western world.

A final point to consider when examining the cost of this conflict to Iran pertains to its stated goal of international independence, one of the chief values its revolution. While Iran's defiant stance has often attempted to portray its autonomy, its international isolation has instead made it more dependent on the countries willing to do business with it, China in particular (Siddiqui 2019). Iran's relationship with China may be transactional, but with limited options available, it is China that holds the cards. International isolation has also forced Iran to consider dealing with Russia (Erlich 2019). Russia and Iran have a tumultuous history, and Russian forces have occupied parts of Iran at various periods

during the past two centuries. Not only would Iran's reliance on Russia defy its policy of "neither East nor West," but it would also defy the tenets of realism, as Russian power poses a more proximate threat to Iran than does the U.S. If Iran was truly as concerned about independence as advertised, a path of international engagement and diversification would have been far more effective than conflict.

Realism and the U.S.-Iranian conflict

This discussion has not been a direct critique realism itself, but a starting point for demonstrating that the intractable conflicts (particularly that between the U.S. and Iran) are a puzzle that requires a new framework for explanation. Realism, like any theory or family of theories, is a lens for viewing the world. It offers tools for analyzing situations – interstate conflict in this case. For realism, these tools center around a materialistic, rational-choice conception of utility-based calculations regarding interest. Its tenets and prescriptions fit most every case to some degree, and some particular cases to a much greater degree. As with the previous discussion of interest, though, realism's fit to a particular case will always be subjective. Proponents of realism can bend the theory to support almost any position, and critics will always challenge their position. This does not mean that theory development is a futile enterprise, though. Analysts weigh the utility of lenses by their explanatory power. They judge this capacity by applying the tools provided. If the tools leave more questions than answers, then the utility of the lens is limited. It must be replaced or augmented with another lens.

Intractable conflict offers such a challenge to realism. Under this paradigm, conflict exists because of a clash of interests between states. It continues until the interests are resolved or one side vanquishes the other. Intractability is simply the space between. In practice, though, this is not always how conflicts play out. As the U.S.-Iranian conflict demonstrates, actors will sometimes perpetuate a

conflict even when a strong argument can be made on both sides that the cost is greater than any potential gain, leading to mutually hurting stalemates. Hostility also shapes and crafts the interests of participants. Further, the interests most served by a protracted conflict are often limited to smaller sections of society, belying the concept of a unified national interest as the justification for hostility. The next section will show that this is well-trodden intellectual territory, but common theoretical frameworks designed to augment realism also fall short of a satisfying explanation. It will also explain why an institutional approach to the problem provides greater utility.

Explanations That Fall Short

If realism has not ultimately triumphed over the course of this 40-year relationship, why is this the case? This section will turn first to prominent realists and examine their own explanations for this apparent breakdown of their theoretical framework, then continue to examine other explanations commonly given for the intractability of this conflict. It will explain why, though each is incisive to a degree, they ultimately fall sort of providing a comprehensive explanation.

Liberal hegemony

If the U.S.-Iranian relationship cannot be readily explained by realism, what then accounts for this aberration in international relations? Leading realists argue that U.S. foreign policy has not conformed to the tenets of realism for several decades, especially in regard to the Middle East. Instead, the U.S. has been seduced by a concept that has come to be known as "liberal hegemony." While the precise origin of the term is difficult to ascertain, Barry Posen credited his own use of the term as a reference to G. J. Ikenberry's "liberal hegemonic order" (Posen 2014, 5). Ikenberry (2011, 2, 3, 8, 22-32, 336-342), a leading proponent of liberalism, outlined the concept in in his *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins,*

Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order. After World War II, the U.S., as the most powerful state in the international system, led the creation of a new world order reflecting its own political and economic values by agreeing to cede some of its power to a new set of institutions. In allowing itself to be so bound, the U.S. made its own leadership palatable to weaker states and paved the way for international cooperation and prosperity. While the Ikenberry used the term "hegemony" to describe the inexorable momentum of this system and its expansion, it was not, for him, a pejorative. This American-led system of order contrasted favorably against alternatives like imperialism and great power politics, and Ikenberry credited the liberal hegemonic order for much of the peace and prosperity experienced since WWII. He also conceded that this world order was under challenge, and that the unilateral tendencies of the George W. Bush administration had exacerbated these difficulties, but ultimately, the liberal order remained both potent and unrivaled in its appeal.

For realists, however, the term liberal hegemony represents a misguided exercise in utopian thinking. John Mearsheimer, one of its foremost critics, explained why the application of liberalism to foreign policy is so dangerous. Liberal hegemony is based upon three, seemingly benign tenets. Economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict, democracies do not fight each other, and international institutions enhance the prospects of cooperation and reduce the likelihood of war (Mearsheimer 2014, 15-17). While each of these tenets are eminently debatable, what is very clear is that their prospects depend upon a community of like-minded states. For this reason, liberalism itself is inherently expansionist (Mearsheimer 2018, 137-139). Further, the human rights values enshrined in liberalism undermine the entire concept of state sovereignty, as liberal states identify the need to advocate for rights of citizens in other states. This combination can result in militarism and coercion, as illiberal states are deemed illegitimate and increasingly toxic to the world order (Mearsheimer 2018, 152-156). In a multipolar system, states are constrained by balance of power politics that limits the ambitions of liberal hegemony, however, as Mearsheimer pointed out,

> … occasionally a liberal democracy encounters such a favorable balance of power that it is able to embrace liberal hegemony. That situation is most likely to arise in a unipolar world, where the single great power does not have to worry about being attacked by another great power since there is none. Then the liberal sole pole will almost always abandon realism and adopt a liberal foreign policy. Liberal states have a crusader mentality hardwired into them that is hard to restrain (Mearsheimer 2018, 2).

Barry Posen (2014, 1-11) explained how this concept took root in U.S. politics. Posen described liberal hegemony as a "grand strategy" for the U.S., or a unifying theory for how the U.S. addresses its national security threats. A grand strategy is not always written, but it is often understood to reflect the prevailing consensus within the policy community. According to Posen, the grand strategy of liberal hegemony took root with the fall of the Soviet Union but only fully blossomed after the attacks of September 11, 2001 with the convergence of two foreign policy camps. The first advocated cooperative security, the liberal internationalist idea that institutions would bind states, and that this coalition would collectively address threats to its order. The second camp called for U.S. "primacy," seeing the U.S. as the key to global security and necessitating a significant overmatch against all potential competitors. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's summarized the resulting worldview succinctly when she dubbed the U.S. as the "indispensable nation." For Posen, this grand strategy has been the primary driver of U.S. hostility toward its adversaries since the end of the Cold War, especially in the Middle East.

Stephen Walt described liberal hegemony in perhaps the most damning terms, portraying U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War as a string of costly failures punctuated only occasionally by bright spots. His work, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, questioned why the U.S. population has been willing to underwrite the poor performance of liberal hegemony for so long. First, he pointed out (Walt 2018, 61) that liberal values are hardwired into the country's political consciousness, and its rhetoric resonates with core American values. As noted by Mearsheimer (2014, 23-27) as well, Americans prefer to talk like liberals even when they are acting like realists. Most importantly for Walt, however, it was the foreign policy establishment that sold liberal hegemony to the American people and sustained its momentum. He stated that, "Liberal hegemony, in

short, was a full-employment policy for the foreign policy elite and a path of least resistance for groups seeking to convince the U.S. government to do something somewhere far away on behalf of somebody else (Walt 2018, 15)." To this end, the establishment inflated the threats posed by selected adversaries and exaggerated the benefits of action, while all the time concealing the true costs of their policies. In a liberal, Manichean fashion, they painted adversaries as irrational or evil, operating on the wrong side of history (Walt 2018, 137-180).

What does liberal hegemony have to do with the U.S.-Iranian relationship? According to Posen (2014, 5), there are three main sources of threat to liberal hegemony: failed states, rogue states, and illiberal peer competitors. Iran is not a failed state, and it is certainly does not qualify as a peer competitor with the U.S. Rogue states, however, are dangerous because they have interests radically inconsistent with the liberal order and may use violence or develop nuclear weapons in order to pursue them. Rogue states are also prone to becoming failed states because of the misguided policies of their leadership. Whether using the term "rogue" or not, successive U.S. administrations since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 have categorized Iran in exactly this fashion. Liberal hegemony does not recognize the legitimacy of Iran's government, it cannot tolerate its challenge to Western conceptions of human rights, and Iran's nuclear ambitions and support for terrorism demonstrate that it is a danger to the liberal order.

Realists like Mearsheimer, Posen, and Walt would undoubtedly argue that liberal hegemony is the root of hostility between the U.S. and Iran. Further, while the U.S. and Iran clashed directly in late 80's, most of the confrontation has taken place in the diplomatic realm, where the U.S. has striven mightily to build international pressure on Iran while generally eschewing direct engagement. Flynt and Hillary Leverett (2013, 301-307) explained how liberal hegemony advocates have undermined diplomacy from two directions. Neoconservatives (representing Posen's "primacy" camp) have preferred to pursue liberal hegemony through military might and direct pressure. Liberal internationalists, on the other

hand, have pursued the same goals, but they have placed greater value on diplomacy. The problem, according to the Leveretts, is that even this camp actually uses diplomacy as a fig-leaf to garner international support for blatant coercion. Mearsheimer (2018, 157-158) postulated that liberalism makes it harder to conduct diplomacy, especially when liberal states feel they have the upper hand, because these states do not fundamentally respect illiberal states and recognize their legitimacy. Some Iranians would doubtless agree with Mearsheimer that the chief stumbling block in the U.S.-Iranian relationship is this inability and unwillingness on the part of the U.S. to recognize and accept core Iranian interests.

Ikenberry (2011, 245, 268) himself (a liberal, not a realist), as the leading proponent for liberal hegemony, did not directly address the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, but he did provide some key insights. In Ikenberry's view, the problem with U.S. foreign policy was not liberal hegemony itself, but the fact that the U.S. was steadily sliding away from this approach. In Ikenberry's view, unipolarity since the end of the Cold War had allowed the U.S. to focus more on hegemony and less on liberalism, coercing other countries but not allowing itself to be bound by rules it imposed. Similar to the Leveretts, he argued that liberal hegemony had been supplanted by "conservative nationalism." This tendency had always grown side-by-side with liberalism throughout the Cold War, but had been set aside at critical junctures, allowing for the construction of the liberal hegemonic order. Ikenberry argued that, especially under the George W. Bush administration, the power of attraction had been replaced by the force of compulsion, calling into question the very foundation of the liberal hegemonic order. If this were applied to the U.S.-Iranian relationship, Ikenberry might contend that the U.S. had removed the incentives for Iran's cooperation while simultaneously forcing it into a corner, where hostility was its only option.[1]

[1] Authors from the liberal camp have spent little time dissecting the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Instead, they have produced extensive literature on the topic of democracy and political reform in Iran. While these topics are beyond the scope

While the liberal hegemony arguments have merit in describing a strand of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, it cannot provide a comprehensive explanation for its intractability. It does not explain why the U.S. has consistently supported Saudi Arabia, an unapologetically authoritarian regime, throughout the same period of time that it has maintained hostility towards Iran. For that matter, the U.S. has supported illiberal regimes throughout the Middle East, and the end of the Cold War did not change this. By many accounts, Iran is one of the most democratic states in the region. Iranian democracy is often criticized as a sham or a façade because ultimate power resides with the unelected organs of government, but this fails to account for developments like the surprise election of Mohammad Khatami in in 1997. Far from being a rubber stamp for Iran's supreme leader, Khatami's reform movement championed many of the values cherished by liberals and sparked a power struggle that transformed Iranian politics in many ways. According to the argument of libel hegemony, this opening should have prompted a softening in the U.S. position toward Iran, but this did not occur in any meaningful sense.

Liberal hegemony also falls short of explaining the U.S.-Iranian relationship because it did not take shape until after the end of the Cold War. Hostility between the U.S. and Iran began in 1979 and intensified over the next decade, reaching a peak during the tanker war in 1987 when military forces on both sides physically attacked each other. It might be argued that Cold War exigencies took precedent prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, but both U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the Iranian Republican Guard Corps developed into viable and mutually antagonistic forces during the decade prior. Mearsheimer argued that Soviet competition constrained the U.S. toward realism throughout the

of this dissertation, the inference that one may draw is a belief that Iran's external behavior is simply a byproduct of its anachronistic and illiberal governance. However, various forms of autocracy are not uncommon, even in the modern world. There is little evidence to suggest that any particular type of government is especially prone to patterns of intractable conflict.

1980's, but he did not explain the continuity between realists and liberals that maintained the antagonism toward Iran, even as Khomeini's death reset conditions in Iran for the 1990's.

Even if liberal hegemony could explain the totality of the U.S. position during this time period, it has little explanatory power regarding Iranian action. It cannot explain Iran's commitment to Hezbollah and Hamas in their struggles against Israel. It cannot explain why Iran would continue to support terrorism against the U.S. and its interests during the 1990's, even while attempting to create openings for engagement. It cannot explain Iran's decision to restart its nuclear program, even while offering and olive branch to the U.S. after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

An institutional approach to the conflict does not ignore the forces discussed within liberal hegemony arguments, but it incorporates them into a larger picture. Liberal hegemonistic inclinations, along with conservative nationalist tendencies, influenced the development of institutions in the U.S. (and to some extent in Iran). These combined in a synergistic fashion with institutional forces at work in Iran to develop a system. The overarching institution of animosity requires mutual construction, so theories focused on the actions or ideologies of one side will not explain intractability.

We made our own bed.

An underlying theme to the argument of liberal hegemony is that the U.S. has created its own enemies. This is a central premise of Andrew Bacevich's work *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*. Bacevich (2016, 362-365) argued that the U.S., through its own policies and actions, has sparked or exacerbated much of the hostility that it has encountered since the Carter administration, especially in the greater Middle East. The U.S. wrongly assumed that power to act came with the necessary wisdom required to successfully shape outcomes. This was underpinned by a sense of the inevitability of the victory of liberal values. Walt (2018, 137-180) expanded on this theme by

arguing that the U.S. foreign policy establishment deliberately downplayed the blowback or second-order effects of foreign intervention, ignoring the role that the U.S. played in fueling the threats it faced.

Applying this logic specifically to Iran, Bacevich and Walt would likely argue that Iranian hostility toward the U.S. has primarily been a reaction to U.S. provocation and interventions. Certainly, the U.S. has applied sanctions and other forms of diplomatic and economic pressure against Iran since the inception of the Islamic Republic, orchestrating its isolation on the international stage. The U.S. supported its mortal enemy, Iraq, in a devastating eight-year war, shot down a passenger airliner during a skirmish with Iranian naval forces, and perpetrated at least one cyber-attack of considerable proportions. While this list of hostile actions could continue, perhaps most importantly, the U.S. has openly challenged the legitimacy of Iran's leaders and their system of government and advocated regime change on numerous occasions. One must concede that Iranian leaders might feel threatened and insulted with some cause.

The first problem with this this approach to explaining the hostility between the U.S. and Iran is that it strips Iranians of their agency. They are reduced to passive actors, merely reflecting the initiatives taken by the more powerful player in the game. Such a view ignores the interests and intentions of Iranian power brokers and rests on the unsupportable assumption that, if the U.S. had just left Iran alone, there would be no reason for the present conflict. The historical record, however, suggests that not only does Iran have agency, but as with the U.S., multiple factions seek their interests at the same time. Numerous examples abound, but the Islamic Republic was born in the fires of factional conflict, largely between the leftists and Khomeini's Islamists. The takeover of the U.S. Embassy in November 1979 was perpetrated by students, probably without Khomeini's knowledge. While the initial motivation of the students may have related to the U.S. decision to admit the deposed Shah for medical treatment, Khomeini's support for the takeover, and the 444 day ordeal that resulted were almost entirely a product of Iran's internal power struggle, in which Khomeini consolidated his

position as the undisputed leader of Iran. Khomeini harnessed a well-spring of popular discontent having little to do with any recent U.S. action and weaponized it to defeat his leftist challengers.

Second, if one were to accept such an approach, then one must also consider that the Iranians have shaped the U.S. by their actions just as much as the other way around. For example, it is almost certain that the horror and humiliation produced by the hostage crisis reduced the political options available to the Reagan administration in dealing with Iran, and ripple effects have been felt by every administration since. It would therefore be just as correct to say that Iranians have made their own bed through their hostility against the U.S. In fact, Takeyh (2012) makes this argument that this was entirely intentional on Iran's part. Provocations against the U.S. were not just a tragic byproduct of factional infighting, but a deliberate campaign by Khomeini and his team to transform the U.S. into the image of the antagonist required by their revolutionary ideology.

To explain how the conflict between the U.S. and Iran became intractable using this approach, one must simultaneously reconcile three key propositions. First, we made our own bed. Second, they made their own bed. Third, events outside the bedroom transpired to make the bed look like this. Combining the first two propositions is the essence of mutual construction, a key principle in institutional theory. Adding the third necessitates an understanding of the institutional dynamics that will be discussed in Chapter 2.

We just don't understand each other.

Another common explanation for the inability of the U.S. and Iran to find a basis for cooperation is the assertion that the two sides misunderstand each other. This is a culturally based argument which assumes that if either side could truly comprehend the other's point of view, then both would find common ground. In making these assertions, the onus is usually placed upon the U.S. to "get it."

Rouhollah Ramazani (2013, 2-3), a leading scholar on Iranian foreign policy, lamented how the U.S. pattern of obtuse thinking with regard to Iran long predated the 1979 revolution and cost the U.S. multiple opportunities for a more productive relationship, especially in the early days of the present regime. Ramazani (2013, 353) also decried America's collective inattention to history. This reflects both a lack of historical knowledge regarding the issues at hand and also a cultural disdain for placing importance on things that happened in the past. An example of this might be criticizing Iran for fixating on America's involvement in the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh. To his credit, Ramazani (2013, 51) also brought up the fact that Iranians have their own mythology with regard to the U.S., and this started under the Shah's regime.

Does the U.S. suffer from a lack of understanding with regard to Iran? It may, but literature explaining the Iranian viewpoint is not in short supply. Ramazani's (2013, 354-358) own book provided a laundry list of key points for officials seeking to understand Iran. Ambassador John Limbert (2009, Chapter 6), one of the U.S. embassy hostages in 1979 and a lifelong scholar of Iran, outlined 14 points for success in a larger work that wrestled with the differences in perception between the two sides. The list of academic and think tank resources offering similar perspectives is lengthy. If the American side of the conflict has both the information and the experts required to understand Iran, what is preventing the U.S. from "getting it?" Anthropologist Negar Razavi (2019) answered this question by suggesting that those who find their way into positions of official influence tend to lack Iran expertise, and the coterie of trusted "Iranian experts" from which they routinely take advice lacks significant credentials and draws poorly on the available body of knowledge. This is undoubtedly true in some cases, but credentials are a coveted commodity in policy circles, and expertise is not as rare as Razavi suggests. Further, the policy community in D.C. is highly networked. Silos certainly exist, but they are by no means rigid.

Flynt and Hilary Leverett (2013, 285-327) provided their own explanation for this phenomenon in their work, arguing that the U.S. foreign policy establishment has fallen under the sway of "myths and

mythmakers" regarding Iran. In the Leveretts's view, the American understanding of Iran has been crafted by neoconservatives, liberal internationalists, expatriate groups (especially the Mojahedin-e Khalq, or M.E.K.), and Israeli interest groups. Not only have these groups painted the Iranian regime as illegitimate, irrational, and dangerous, but they have stifled dissenting views by portraying those who disagree as Iranian apologists or collaborators. In this case, the silos do not represent a lack of understanding but an unwillingness to consider other views.

It is readily apparent that some degree of bifurcation exists between ideologues and those possessing a deep understanding of Iran in the U.S., but does this mean that a lack of understanding offers the primary explanation for the conflict? First, with an open market for ideas and an academic community that ultimately educates each generation of America's leaders, the lack of understanding would have to be willful. A willful lack of understanding would require a deeper explanation than the seduction of a mythology. Second, two parties can understand each other perfectly and still fundamentally disagree. For instance, no degree of understanding with regard to Iran's rights, grievances, or intentions is likely to convince hawkish American policymakers that a nuclear armed Iran is anything less than a threat.

Another point that Ramazani missed is that Americans fixate on history, as well. Most Americans today were not born yet when Iran took 52 American citizens hostage in the U.S. embassy in Tehran, but Americans still associate this incident with their image of Iran. Further, the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut is never far from the discussion when Iran is described as the "leading state sponsor of terror" (Morley 2019). One could argue that mythmakers have weaponized these events for their own purposes, but Iranian acts of aggression did occur, and the American memory is not so short as some would make it out to be.

An institutional approach to this conflict harnesses both history and mythology in a larger framework, effectively bypassing thorny questions regarding the line between the two. Misunderstandings and grievances serve as building blocks for the conflict. Incessant arguments over culpability and blame need not be resolved, only properly identified for what they are.

Israeli influence

Yet another prominent explanation for the intractable nature of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran is the influence of the state of Israel and its lobbying apparatus on the U.S. government and society. Trita Parsi, in his work, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, made the case that Israel has almost singlehandedly built the framework through which U.S. policymakers view Iran. Parsi (2007, 2-4, 157-171) argued that the defeat of Saddam Hussein's military by coalition forces in 1991 prompted a strategic pivot by both Israel and Iran. Before this time, in spite of Khomeini's anti-Israeli rhetoric and support for Hezbollah, the two states quietly cooperated and maintained extensive ties, especially during the Iran-Iraq War. However, the neutering of Iraq as the primary source of threat to both parties changed their strategic calculus. Iran was now free to explore its regional ambitions, and Israel shifted focus, identifying Iran as the greatest threat to its own position of regional dominance. Perhaps more importantly, the Israelis feared that their international image as an embattled underdog was now in jeopardy, and without an existential threat, U.S. support would become more conditional, reducing Israeli freedom of maneuver with regard to the Palestinian question. Recognizing the need to demonstrate a clear and present danger, Israel began to sow a new narrative with regard to Iran, pushing the mythology that Iranian leaders were irrational, fanatical, and even suicidal in their religious zealotry and hatred of both Israel and the West.

Parsi (2007, 175-189) described how Israel developed its influence campaign with the U.S. government. Not only did it directly engage government officials through diplomatic channels, but it also leveraged civil society networks and especially its lobbying apparatus, spearheaded by the American Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC), which Parsi dubbed the "king of lobbies." Israel's goal was to isolate Iran diplomatically and limit its regional influence, and especially to delegitimize any role it might attempt to play in negotiations with the Palestinians. In response, Iran stepped up its terrorist activity and support for Palestinian terrorist groups in the 1990's, a move which only bolstered the mythology that Israel intended to perpetuate. For Parsi, this trend has largely continued unabated to the present day. In a subsequent work, he (Parsi 2017, 156-160) explained how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed this strategy into overdrive with regard to the conflict over Iran's nuclear program, even attempting to push the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war in an effort to undermine any possibility of a peaceful settlement.

As with several other potential explanations for the endurance of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, Parsi's approach is compelling because it is based on widely accepted facts. One need look no further than the newspaper headlines to recognize that Israel has demonstrated a tremendous amount of influence over U.S. politics, and AIPAC, in particular, has distinguished itself as one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington, D.C. Israel's own conflict with Iran is well documented, and politicians like Netanyahu have been beating the drum with remarkable consistency. Israel must, therefore, play an important role in explaining the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The key question is whether Israeli influence is fully sufficient to account for the depth and breadth of the animosity that has endured between these states since 1979.

The first problem one encounters in leaning primarily on Israeli influence to explain this conflict is one of temporality. Parsi's (2007, 95-109, 115-126) historical narrative explained that Iran and Israel were silent partners to a large degree during the 1980's. Israel provided arms to Iran, even irking the

U.S. at times, such as when Prime Minister Begin approved a shipment during the early days of the hostage crisis in 1980. Israel also helped facilitate the ill-fated arms-for-hostages deal which turned into the Iran-Contra Affair. For Iran's part, most of its rhetoric against Israel remained just that during the 1980's, and Iran's vitriol against Israel was confined primarily to the diplomatic realm. For the U.S., on the other hand, the conflict with Iran began in 1979 and continued throughout the 1980's. It would be impossible to understand the perceptions of key leaders U.S. leaders looking at Iran in the 1990's without considering the 444-day media event of the hostage crisis, Iran's role in radicalizing dissident groups throughout the Middle East (especially in Lebanon), or the tanker war that brought the U.S. and Iran into direct military conflict.

The second problem with giving primacy to the argument that Israeli influence has caused the conflict is that it downplays the actions and perceptions of leaders on the Iranian side of the conflict. Israel may have begun stoking the fire in the 1990's, but Iranian memories went back further as well. The U.S. role in 1953 coup against Mossadegh, U.S. support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, and the shootdown of Iran Air Flight 655, to name only a few events, all informed the viewpoints of Iran's leaders. The Iranian practice of chanting "Death to America!" and Khomeini's vehemence in defying the "Great Satan" long predated Israeli efforts to turn the U.S. against Iran. Many of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers established their own political legitimacy on ant-American credentials. Even after Israel's influence campaign began in earnest, Iranian leaders were under no obligation to play the role they were assigned. It would be hard to make a case that Israel was responsible for the Iranian decisions to support terrorist groups, continue their rhetoric against the United States, or restart their nuclear weapons program.

Finally, even accepting a high degree of Israeli influence over U.S. politics, the Israelis could not have garnered the level of support they did if the conditions were not already favorable for the perpetuation of conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The Israeli lobby has not been infallible, though.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's failure to prevent the ratification of the JPCOA provided a prominent example. U.S. politicians are beholden to American voters, not Israeli, and viewpoints regarding Israel are not homogenous in the U.S. While lawmakers might be happy to take campaign funds from AIPAC, Israeli concerns compete with any number of hot-button issues for center stage in U.S. policy discussions. Moreover, Iran is only one of the policy issues about which the Israelis lobby the U.S. government. Simply put, even if perpetuating this conflict has been a high priority for Israel, there must have been other enabling conditions in both the U.S. and Iran which have allowed them to have their way. An institutional approach to the conflict will place Israeli influence within the context of this larger structure and help to clarify when and why it was so successful at particular points in time.

Two-level games - the closest cousin to an institutional theory of conflict

Another approach that one might take to explain the U.S.-Iranian relationship is based upon the concept of the two-level game. Robert Putnam (1988) applied this framework to his study of international negotiation. Essentially, each player in the process of international diplomacy is managing two separate game boards simultaneously. Not only are they maneuvering against their opponent, but they are beholden to a slate of domestic constituencies who ultimately determine the dimensions of the solution or "win-set" set that the negotiator is able to proffer. Putnam (1988, 434) explained that, "The political complexities for the players in this two-level game are staggering. Any key player at the international table who is dissatisfied with the outcome may upset the game board, and conversely, any leader who fails to satisfy his fellow players at the domestic table risks being evicted from his seat." Putnam's (1988, 436) work specifically referenced the Reagan administration's attempt to negotiate an arms-for-hostages deal with Iran. While both sides apparently supported such an arrangement behind closed doors, public disclosure subjected the negotiations to an impossible morass of domestic interests

that undermined any opportunity for success. More recently, the two-level game dynamic found itself on full display in the nuclear negotiations between John Kerry and Mohammad Javad Zarif. In this case, the process resulted in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA), however, both negotiating teams faced stiff opposition from their own domestic critics, and these opponents ultimately succeeded in undermining the agreement after the fact.

Steven David (1991) made a similar application of the two-level game concept in examining the external alignment of third-world states. David, instead of looking at negotiations, focused on the calculations of state leaders with regard to balancing against threats. On one hand, they are compelled to balance against potential external threats for the good of the state. On the other hand, they are worried about sustaining their own position of leadership, and the greatest threats to their own power often arise from domestic factions or constituencies. Therefore, leaders use a strategy that David dubbed "omnibalancing," choosing a combination of internal and external alignment that best ensures their own longevity. One can easily argue that Iran's leaders have applied this concept in their relations with the United States. Bound by Khomeini's anti-American legacy, leaders have found themselves unable to seek rapprochement without undermining their own domestic legitimacy and revolutionary credentials, even when rapprochement would offer benefits. Likewise, it is apparent that President Obama payed a heavy political price for his efforts to conclude a nuclear deal with Iran. The common theme between Putnam and David's work is that domestic constituents and institutions constrain a leader's freedom of action on the international stage.

The idea that narrowly focused special interest groups could capture the machinery of the state and undermine a government's ability to act in the broader interest of society is not new. J. A. Hobson's (1902) classic work on imperialism argued that, especially for Great Britain, imperial projects were enormously costly endeavors that primarily benefitted a coterie of merchants and financiers at the expense of the British nation. This influential group propagated a slew of misleading narratives that

captured public opinion and bolstered their position. Jack Snyder (1991) expanded upon Hobson's work, explaining how this process operates in practice. As politics becomes increasingly factional (or "cartelized"), interest groups revert to the practice of "logrolling," where bargains to secure their own position are paid for by concessions that draw upon societal resources. When all sides engage in the practice, the direction of national policy can become more extreme than any one group would have chosen by themselves, but they all support the narrative that underpins this policy.

David Keen (2012 & 2008) applied this concept of state capture by interest groups to ethnically charged conflicts in Africa. Keen argued that some of these lingering wars were especially difficult to resolve, not because equitable agreements were out of reach, but because powerful actors gained more from perpetuating the conflict than they would from making peace. Warlords, in particular, thrived on the chaos of bloodshed and insecurity, capturing and siphoning wealth from the natural resources of the countries involved. The termination of a conflict would inevitably erode their privileged position in favor of popular accountability, so conditions that could satisfy all the parties to a conflict were especially difficult to engineer.

Of the explanations discussed so far for the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, two-level game theory and its associates come the closest to an institutional theory of conflict. As Chapter 2 will discuss, domestic politics is often the driver for the institutionalization of conflict. Two-level games can be excellent for illuminating the art of the possible at any given moment, especially in regard to a particular negotiation or a discrete issue. The argument of this dissertation, though, is that two-level games are insufficient to understand the totality of the problem. They cannot explain how long-term patterns of counterproductive animosity take root and perpetuate over time, especially when multiple issues merge or compound.

Two-level games, along with game theory in general, are rooted in the concept of rational choice. They view decision-makers as strict utility maximizers, and utility is a relatively objective and identifiable quality. In this vein, Keen's (2012 & 2008) work commended the practice of "interest mapping," where the interests of all parties to a conflict are portrayed in relation to one another. Taken to the extreme, a conflict can thus be reduced to a mathematical equation, and the solution to the equation would represent the requirements for resolution at any given time. Bruce Bueno De Mesquita (1984) achieved near hero status applying mathematical modeling to the question of who would succeed Ayatollah Khomeini after his death. While not interest mapping, per se, Bueno De Mesquita's game theoretic model successfully predicted Ali Khamenei's accession to the position of Supreme Leader five years before it occurred. Unfortunately, game theory's track record for predicting world events, especially with regard to Iran, has rarely been so successful. Critics of De Mesquita's work might also point out that Khamenei was one of very few viable candidates when he was chosen. As Jacques Mallet du Pan observed, revolutions devour their children. Few of Khomeini's closest followers survived the revolution and managed to stay within his good graces until his death. Even the best of game theoretic models will only be as good as its programming, and this will always rely on assumptions and insights that cannot be produced scientifically.

Applying a game theory approach to the study of intractable conflict suffers from a number of additional shortfalls, especially when considering interest mapping. First, one must identify an appropriate level of analysis that accurately captures all of the key variables. Individuals, groups and societies all make important contributions, so it becomes almost impossible to isolate an appropriate level. Second, reducing a conflict to an equation requires near-perfect understanding of the players involved. If actors are missed or inappropriately grouped, the project will be for naught. Third, even a perfect equation would represent only a brief moment in time as events would continually shift the sands.

This brings up perhaps the greatest shortcoming of such an approach. Game theory can model the present, but it is not equipped to explain how the current state came into being. It may incorporate patterns of action borrowed from history, but it deals poorly with emotion, habit and other factors that muddy the water of rationality and skew the concept of utility in the eyes of the beholder. Further, it fails to account for the mutually constructed nature of the conflict. Domestic constituencies, which Putnam refers to as "Level 2" of his game, are not always mediated through centralized leaders or negotiators (Level 1) in the effects they have on the overall process. These constituencies often have the power, not only to tie the hands of Level 1, but to directly affect or enflame their own Level 2 counterparts. For instance, political rhetoric and maneuvering in the U.S. Congress and the Iranian Majles prior to the JPCOA went beyond signaling an unwillingness to ratify a deal over Iran's nuclear program. Both parties aimed directly to heighten tensions between the two states with threats and accusations.

The concepts of two-level games, omni-balancing, and other domestically rooted explanations for international conflict do not require complex mathematical modelling to produce useful insights. However, intractable conflicts are more than just static sets of actors and programmed lists of rules for how they interact. Sometimes the game takes on a life of its own, ignoring the artificial boundaries used to model decisions and events. There may be hidden rules that make little sense in the context of the question at hand, yet they prove binding. Rules from other games may bleed over in ways that are difficult to anticipate, or outside actors may join the game, uninvited. Rules might change (and frequently do) or fail to constrain actors in the same ways they previously have. Of course, players change over time, as well. Just as one can never cross the same river twice, one will never face the same adversary again.

What an institutional approach to a theory of conflict has to offer

The field of security studies is not short on theories that tie international conflict to domestic politics, but viewing intractable conflict as an institution offers a number of key advantages. First, by taking a broad historical perspective, it accounts for the cumulative effects of decisions and events over time, which continually alter the game itself. Where rational choice approaches explain conflict through the balance of interests at any particular time, an institutional approach traces continual evolution. This provides a vehicle for incorporating less-tangible factors which are difficult to model. It also addresses the question of why transient actors in a changing world retain particular worldviews and interest calculations that defy objective analysis. Ultimately, viewing constituencies as institutions, both shaped by and shaping the actual conflict, provides a clearer view of role played by domestic politics in producing intractability.[2]

Second, an institutional approach accounts for the mutual constitution of a conflict. Even if one can explain the enduring interest in animosity on one side of the conflict, why should the other side keep playing the game? In some wars, national survival might be at stake, but this is an unlikely explanation for conflicts that simmer and spurt for long periods of time. If one side had the capability and will to destroy the other, then conflict would never have become intractable. What these conflicts demonstrate instead is that constituencies on both sides actively stir the pot in synergistic fashion, undermining potential opportunities for rapprochement. This unconscious collaboration suggests a larger institutional force that binds adversaries who possess little else in common.

Third, institutional analysis accounts for both structure and agency. Neither actors nor interests are perfectly discrete in any conflict. Almost every conflict has its peacemakers, and this approach

[2] This dissertation will also show that constituencies can encompass more than just domestic political groups within two sides of a conflict. Third-party actors can develop constituencies which bear upon the perpetuation of the same conflict, as well.

explains why they have been unsuccessful while also accounting for the long-term impact of their voices in shaping the relationship over time.

Fourth, an institutional lens harnesses the best features of interest-based analysis. It removes cultural arguments and ideology from the equation, while accounting for affective contributions to the construction of interests. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield (2010) pointed out that even in the oldest and most traditional societies in the world, historical narratives are malleable and quickly bent to serve pressing interests, especially in the case of conflict. Ideology is likewise flexible. This approach also favors interest over the concept of trust. Mistrust is a theme that permeates common explanations for the perpetuation conflicts. However, trust is rare in international relations and is almost never a basis for rapprochement. When it develops, it happens later, over the course of a cooperative relationship. Lastly, conceiving intractable conflict as an institution helps to homogenize the concept of interest. Instead of dealing with the gordian knot of various factional interests, this dissertation will focus on the stake that participants develop in the conflict itself. This is more easily comparable across parties and time.

An institutional theory of intractable conflict is complementary to other approaches, especially those rooted in rational choice. Whereas interest mapping might elucidate the current state of affairs, the institutional lens will reveal the tectonic plates that shift underneath the game board and shape those interests over time. Where game theory offers predictions about what will happen in the future, based on the best information available today, an institutional theory would instead describe the mechanisms driving events and explain the manner in which events are likely to unfold, regardless of what eventuality occurs. Perhaps most importantly, institutional analysis can assist in the generation of assumptions upon which other theoretic models rely.

Such a theory will also have important implications for conflict resolution. If conflict behaves like an institution according to predictable mechanisms and patterns even some of the time, and these dynamics can be identified, then peacemakers can develop more effective tools. Conflict resolution strategies that account for these mechanisms will prove more likely to succeed, and opportunities for cooperation will be more readily apparent. Charles Kupchan (2010) offered one of the seminal works on the topic of rapprochement between adversaries. He explained that rapprochement starts with realism and requires an alignment of interest on both sides as a necessary condition. However, this alignment alone is not sufficient to start the process, and Kupchan's work could not explain why it begins in some cases and not in others. Additionally, he cited elite buy-in as a necessary condition for long-term cooperation. By conceptualizing conflict as an institution in its own rite, this approach can illuminate the process by which elites build their interests around a conflict. Understanding how interests are constructed may provide insight into how they can be diverted or deconstructed as well.

Literature Review for the U.S.-Iran Case Study

One of the chief contentions of this dissertation is that the conflict between the U.S. and Iran is not driven by a lack of knowledge or available information between the two sides. There is a tremendous body of literature available in the West with regard to Iran and the U.S. relationship with Iran. In spite of sometimes draconian restrictions by the government of Iran, the Iranian people also have considerable access to Western media and knowledge repositories. This dissertation will show that many authors have been telling an institutional story of the conflict all along, without fully appreciating the implications of their insights. What this work will do in Chapters 3-6 is organize an account of 40 years of conflict that highlights the institutional aspects of the relationship, using the existing knowledge and information. As with any work on Iran, it will only be able to scratch the surface

with regard to available literature. For every important work discussed, many more will necessarily be left out. While this dissertation draws on a range of primary and secondary sources of information, this review will focus most heavily on the books and memoirs that have impacted the field, identifying both seminal works and key contributions. It will also mention news and journal articles, think-tank pieces, and government documents, but with less specificity. Lastly the general discussion of institutional theory and its foundational works will wait until Chapter 2.

This review will begin with a short discussion of the challenges and opportunities that one faces in researching Iran, and the U.S.-Iranian relationship. The next section will focus on literature specific to Iran, accepting that this literature will overlap with other sections, as well. Next, the review will consider works that examine the U.S.-Iranian relationship from a holistic or multi-decade perspective. Finally, it will look at works that offer significant contributions to each decade of the conflict.

Challenges and opportunities in studying Iran

One of the challenges of compiling this type of work as an American researcher is accurately capturing the Iranian perspective. Ideally, when studying two sides of a conflict, one would gather information equally from primary and secondary sources on both sides. With regard to Iran, this is challenging for a number of reasons. The language barrier presents an obvious challenge, even for researchers with some skill in Persian Farsi. This dissertation will refer to a small handful of articles and a memoir in Persian, but this will admittedly be a shortcoming. This challenge is compounded by a lack of physical access to Iran, where archival information and publications not available in the West might contribute significantly to this type of effort. Perhaps the most difficult challenge, though, is that publication in Iran has long been restricted and controlled. This was true under the Shah, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but since that time, it has only gotten worse. Consequently, while Iran has an

extensive media and publishing industry, the veracity of the knowledge it produces is questionable, at best. It is not that accurate information is unavailable in all circumstances, but it is often buried in or drowned out by propaganda, political correctness, and conspiracy theories. For their own protection, Iranians have developed their own particular brand of nuance and doublespeak which can make it difficult for outside researchers to identify or appreciate significant arguments or facts.

There are a number of factors which mitigate these challenges, though. To begin with, Iran has a thriving expatriate community in the U.S. and Europe, and they are well represented in the academic community. In the years following the revolution, many of Iran's leading scholars and best educated citizens simply relocated to the West. While Iranians within Iran were limited in their ability to document and assess the revolution and its aftermath, academics like Mohsen Milani (1994), with intimate knowledge of the people and events, were publishing the work that their countrymen could not. Over the course of decades, the salience of their personal connections to Iran faded (especially among second-generation expatriates), but they still provide an invaluable resource for the academic and journalistic communities. In spite of social restrictions and personal security concerns, Iranians also travel to and from the West with surprising frequency, and some Western journalists and researchers have travelled to Iran on semi-regular basis, refreshing the societal links between Iran and West. For this reason, certain reputable news agencies like the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *BBC*, and the *Guardian*, can often add value when they discuss reporting from the Iranian press because they can navigate the obstacles that might stymie most Westerners and highlight the nuggets of significance.

For these reasons among others, some of the best work on Iran is done from the outside, and the picture of two bifurcated sets of knowledge and experience is deceiving. In reality, these knowledge sets overlap, and the question of whether a work was produced in Iran or the West is not the deciding factor when considering the authenticity of an Iranian viewpoint. Even considering the author's cultural heritage is dangerous territory. One cannot assume that Iranian heritage necessarily confers authority,

or that the lack of this heritage limits insight or expertise. Academic work will always benefit from greater access to information, and one notable shortfall of this dissertation is the lack of access to government documents in Iran, but there is no guarantee that Iranian researchers in Iran would gain access to these resources, either. Overall, the events considered by this dissertation are well documented from a variety of sources and points of view, and these sources are more than sufficient to paint a reasonable picture of the institutionalization of the conflict.

The next challenge to consider when outlining this body of work is organization. Most of the information used by this dissertation came from journalists and media reporting, historians and other social scientists, analysis by think tanks and other private organizations, and U.S. government documents. Some covered specific events or relatively discrete topic areas, while others were broader in scope. These individuals and the issue areas they cover overlap at almost every conceivable point. Some of the best books on the history of the U.S.-Iranian relationship were written by journalists like Barbara Slavin (2007), who has covered the topic for years. Some government officials, like Suzanne Maloney (2015) have moved to think-tanks, or vice-versa. This review will next consider some key works and authors in a few broad categories, starting with literature specific to the Islamic Republic.

Literature on the Islamic Republic

With a history that dates back before the first dynasty of the Persian Empire and the reign of Cyrus the Great in the sixth Century B.C., there is no shortage of literature on Iran. The Islamic Republic, in its short but controversial existence, has spawned considerably more. This section will narrow the focus to key works that provide substantive input to historical development of Iran since 1979 in the political and military realms.

Yale University's Abbas Amanat (2017) provided an excellent starting point for examining the Islamic Republic. Amanat's (2017) work is a historical account of Iran from the beginning of its first systemically Shiite dynasty in 1501 through the early 2010's. This frames the 1979 revolution and its aftermath in the larger themes and currents of Iranian history. Exeter University's Michael Axworthy (2007) offered a somewhat similar experience, taking Iranian history all the way from antiquity to the mid-2000's, although with far less detail than Amanat. Axworthy's (2013) best-known book has become a seminal work on the Islamic Revolution and the first three decades of political and military history in Iran. In particular, it provides considerable detail on the Iran-Iraq War and its effect on Iranian politics and society. University of Florida's Mohsen Milani wrote perhaps the most seminal work (Milani 1994) on the revolution and the first decade and a half of the Islamic Republic. His background and personal connections allowed him to describe the inner workings of Iranian politics under Khomeini (and shortly after his demise) with a clarity few could match. In a completely different style of information, Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani (2018) offer an encyclopedic compendium of influential Iranian politicians and formal power structures wit in the Islamic Republic since its inception.

The rise and relative decline of Iran's reform movement in the late 1990's through the first half of the 2000's spawned another generation of writing on the Islamic Republic, focused less on the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, and more on the questions which followed. Journalist Robin Wright, who has covered Iran variously since the 1970's and written a book (Wright 1989) about Iran's experience under Khomeini's rule, wrote a more influential book (Wright 2000) about the social and cultural transformations that ushered reform-minded President Mohammad Khatami to office in 1997. Wright would go on to become the editor for the U.S. Institute of Peace *Iran Primer* project, which published a hardcopy in 2010, and has since continued making online updates. This project covers a wide spectrum of Iranian politics, military, economic, and social issues. Journalists Geneive Abdo and Jonathan Lyons (2003) took readers behind the scenes in the politics of the Khatami's administration,

helping to explain why the reform movement produced such disappointing results. Professors Gheissari and Nasr (2006) examined the prospects for democracy in Iran, looking back as far as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 but primarily focused on the politics of reform under the Islamic Republic. Georgetown University's Shireen Hunter (2014) examined the political machinations and societal divides that resulted as the Islamic Republic travelled through its second and third decades, attempting to translate Khomeini's edicts to succeeding generations with little or no memory of his rule. Ray Takeyh, who has been criticized for his advocacy of regime change in Iran, has also written prominent works including (Takeyh 2012), in which he explained how hardliners had developed an iron grip on Iranian politics, unlikely to be broken by peaceful attempts at reform.

Certain authors have also distinguished themselves by focusing on niche areas of Iranian politics. The University of Virginia's R. K. Ramazani has been publishing essays on Iran's foreign policy since the early 1980's, which he compiled into a book (Ramazani 2013), examining Iran's relations with the outside world by period. Shireen Hunter (2010) made her own contribution to the analysis of Iran's foreign relations, specific to the post-Cold War era. Suzanne Maloney, of the Brookings Institute (formerly a U.S. State Department official) wrote the definitive work on Iran's political economy since the 1979 revolution (Maloney 2015), explaining how economic factors within the Islamic Republic affected the political realm at key junctures over almost four decades. Kevan Harris (2017) wrote the history of the Islamic Republic's social welfare state, a work which helps explain some of the stability and success that Iran has Iran has experienced, even in the midst of political repression and turmoil.

The Iranian military, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is another key niche in literature on Iran. Many works touch on these topics, but far fewer focus specifically. Central Intelligence Agency analyst Steven Ward (2009) authored one of the seminal works on Iran's military, explaining how it evolved through the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Kenneth Katzman, a longtime researcher with the Congressional Research Service, has authored a number of important pieces,

including (Katzman 1993), which described the foundation and early history of the IRGC. The Rand Corporation has also sponsored research on the IRGC, including Schahgaldian and Barkhordarian (1987) and Wehrey (2009). Steven O'hern (2012), a retired military intelligence officer, authored a more recent work on the IRGC specifically, which especially highlights the growth and development of the organization over the 2000's. While not an academic work, it is well-researched and provides some useful insights. Johns Hopkins' Narges Bajoghli (2019) provided an otherwise unprecedented inside view into the information operations of the IRGC, as well as generational and ideological divides within the organization.

Much of the research available on the IRGC is sponsored or generated by think tanks. This contribution is invaluable in many ways, but it also means that information is sometimes presented within the framework of a biased agenda. Ottolenghi (2011), published by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, and Alfoneh (2013) from the American Enterprise Institute are examples of relatively balanced and solid analysis of the IRGC, focused on the research and information. Berman (2005), representing the American Foreign Policy Council, is a book that tilts so heavily toward a hawkish agenda that the information it presents is virtually unusable in an academic work. Almost every fact presented is somehow woven into a narrative of Iran's imminent threat to the U.S.

Literature on the U.S.-Iranian Relationship

The U.S.-Iranian relationship has also generated a wide body of literature, often overlapping with the literature more specific to Iran. Department of Defense senior historian David Crist (2012) offered perhaps the most far-ranging account of the political, military, and intelligence conflict between the two countries. His work drew upon official sources unavailable to most researchers that provided insights into both the U.S. and the Iranian sides, largely through intelligence information. Brookings

Institute scholar and former C.I.A. analyst Kenneth Pollack (2004) also wrote a seminal history of the first two decades of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Pollack has been criticized for his advocacy of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and his hawkish stance toward Iran, but (Pollack 2004) is a balanced and historically grounded work that has been widely cited since its publication. University of Minnesota's William Beeman (2005) offered an anthropological perspective into the mutual demonization by the U.S. and Iran and the generation of narratives.

Former government officials have made key contributions to the literature, as well. Diplomat John Limbert, who was held by Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis, provided some observations (Limbert 1987) into how Khomeini came to power in his revolution and began to defy the U.S., as well as some very practical insights (Limbert 2009) into the particularities of negotiating with Iran. Former State Department and CIA officials Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverrett (2013) authored one of the most critical accounts of U.S. policy toward Iran available in the West. Their work took aim at many of the common myths that have guided U.S. officials and argued that the government of Iran is neither illegitimate nor weak. Their combative approach drew predictable opposition from many corners of the U.S. policy community, but their points were well-researched and supported. On the Iranian side, Seyed Hossein Mousavian (2012), who served in a number of high-level positions in the Iranian government, offered his perspective on more than a decade of conflict between the U.S. and Iran over the nuclear issue. While offering few apologies for Iranian behavior, his position represented the more dovish and reflective camp typical of the Khatami administration.

Journalists have also taken a leading role in chronicling the U.S.-Iranian relationship, not only in newspaper reporting but in the books they write. Robin Wright, who has already been mentioned as one of the most prominent names in the Western literature with regard to Iran, has closely covered the U.S.-Iranian relationship, as well. Barbara Slavin's (2007) book narrated the story of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, especially in the 2000's and 2010's, as a tragedy of two states with common interests that

just cannot overcome their differences. Jay Solomon (2016) dug into the secretive military and intelligence arenas of conflict between the U.S. and Iran over several decades, demonstrating linkages between known events and political competition that was quietly shaping them. Other works by leading journalists cover shorter periods of time and include the U.S.-Iranian relationship among other issues. David Sanger (2012) examined President Obama's foreign policy during his first term in office, and this included his overtures toward Iran as well as more provocative actions like the 2010 Stuxnet cyber-attack against Iran's nuclear program.

Scholar Trita Parsi, who has been associated with several think tanks and prestigious universities, has carved his own niche in the area of research on the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Parsi's (2007) work focuses on the role that the state of Israel has played in stoking the fire between the U.S. and Iran since the early 1990's, linking the conflict to other Israeli priorities. In doing so, Parsi provides insights into the U.S. policymaking apparatus, as well as Iran's. Parsi's (2017) book provides the most detailed and comprehensive account available of President Obama's efforts to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran, including the negotiation process that took place both in private and within the public eye. This book heavily complements Parsi's (2007) earlier work. Parsi (2012) covered Obama's attempts at rapprochement with Iran during his first term in office, but the book is largely redundant with material provided in the (2007) and (2017) offerings.

The first decade: 1979-1989

The first decade of the U.S. relationship with the Islamic Republic is by far the best documented and provides the widest body of primary source documents. This is both because there has been more time to do so, but also because it was marked by high-profile events. Leading U.S. newspapers closely followed many of key events of the decade. Also, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (a

translated extract from primary source newspapers) provided almost daily reports of major stories in Iranian newspapers, and these are available online. Additionally, many U.S. government documents from the Carter and Reagan administration have been released, offering a large repository of primary source documents.

Some of the events of this first decade have inspired seminal works of their own. National Security Council Staffer (and later professor) Gary Sick (1986) authored a largely first-hand (primary source) account of the Carter administration's reactions to the fall of the Shah and the subsequent hostage crisis. Author Barry Rubin (1980) provided early insight into this period, placing the Islamic Revolution in a historical context for Western audiences. William and Mary's James Bill (1988) offered a post-mortem analysis of the U.S. relationship with the Shah and the anatomy of an intelligence failure. Journalist Mark Bowden (2007) narrated the hostage crisis from the perspective of the hostages using extensive interviews. Historian Bryan Gibson (2010) provided a unique account of the covert U.S. relationship with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Blight, et. al (2012) is an oral history compiled by a collection of academic authors who conducted group interviews with U.S. officials who were active during the first eight years of the Islamic Republic and discussed the path by which the U.S. policy establishment turned irrevocably against Iran. Judicial scholar Lee Allen Zatarain (2010) offered a comprehensive historical narrative of the Tanker War between the U.S. and Iran in 1987 and 1988. The Iran-Contra Affair also generated reams of official reports (including those collected in Walsh 1994) and outside analysis (including Draper 1991).

Another important primary resource available only to the first decade, so far, is the collection of President Rafsanjani's memoirs. The volumes released to the public now cover the revolution through 1989, but they have not yet been translated from Persian. These writings are presented on a daily diary format. While they provide an important and only partially tapped resource for understanding points of context behind key events, their release did not reveal any major bombshells of previously unknown

events, nor did they force historians to reconsider accepted history. A brief perusal of these volumes in their original Persian portrays the fairly mundane existence of a politician. Rafsanjani listed daily events in a rather matter-of-fact fashion, often detailing who he met with and where, but with little description of the details of those conversations. Rafsanjani was also very guarded in expressing his feelings and opinions, for the most part, which make for sterile reading. One observation that might be made from these memoirs is that Iran's clerical leaders lived relatively cloistered lives, spending much of their time in their homes or other private spaces. Like much of Iranian literature, there is undoubtedly a treasure trove of potential discoveries to be made by reading between the lines and applying detailed historical analysis, but this is not a task for beginner or even intermediate Persian speakers, and most of the results would be too finely-grained to contribute to a big-picture study of four decades.

A final primary resource to consider was the Last Will and Testament of Ayatollah Khomeini (1989). This document has translated to English and published. It offered not only Khomeini's unique perspective on the Islamic Republic as his own project, but it gave guidance to future generations and would be a reference point, especially for hardliners in Iran, for years to come.

The second decade: 1989-2000

The second decade of the U.S.-Iranian relationship was less headline-grabbing than the first. However, newspapers still covered key events as a primary source. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) (a translated extract from primary source newspapers) provided their almost daily reports of Iranian media until 1996, at which time it was discontinued. Its successor offered only a sparse collection of occasional reporting from Iran, a huge loss to researchers. Journalists like Robin Wright (1992) speculated about potential rapprochement between the two countries, even as the relationship was worsening behind the scenes. Some U.S. government documents have also been declassified, but

not as many as those from the 1980's, and congressional hearings provide insight into the worldview of U.S. policymakers during the period. Researcher Marian Paules (2003) studied congressional hearings throughout this period in her doctoral dissertation, identifying themes and narratives that would guide U.S. actions with regard to Iran for years to come. Award-winning journalist Richard Sale (2009) also chronicled the Clinton administration's "secret wars," and while Iran was rarely the center of attention in U.S. foreign policy, the points of intersection were plentiful.

Some of the works already outlined in previous sections provide the baseline for an account of this time period. Additionally, though, memoirs by certain U.S. officials add considerable context to the story. These memoirs offer a combination of primary and secondary source information. Secretary of State James Baker's (1996) memoir speaks volumes by what it does not say with regard to Iran - a country largely ignored by the first Bush administration. Senior diplomat Martin Indyk (2009) provided one of the most revealing accounts of the Clinton administration policy of "dual containment," which treated Iran as a "rogue state." Secretary of State Madelene Albright's (et al. 2003) memoir recounted her attempts under the Clinton administration to build bridges with Iran after the election of President Khatami in 1997.

The third decade: 2001-2008

The third decade of the U.S.-Iranian conflict was considerably more storied than the second. Again newspapers and media outlets offered primary source coverage of key events, and their reporting sometimes preceded policy shifts on the U.S. side, such as with the disclosure of Iran's nuclear enrichment program in 2002 and the mounting evidence in 2005 that Iran was sponsoring attacks against coalition troops in Iraq. FBIS had long ceased providing publicly available summaries of Iranian newspapers, but internet advances over the course of the decade made Iranian news more accessible to

the West, and particularly to Western journalists, who could now scour Iranian media outlets in real-time.

Because the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq generated so much historical literature, researchers of the U.S.-Iranian relationship received a tangential benefit, and these works are just a sample. George W. Bush (2011), explained in his own words why he chose to increase the pressure on Iran and brand them among the "Axis of Evil." Journalist Bob Woodward (2002) and (2004) complimented Bush's statements and helped to fill in the details. City University of New York's Ervand Abrahamian (2004) provided the Iranian perspective on the "axis of evil" concept and U.S. policy. Friedman (2004) helped explain the cooperation between the U.S. and Iran after the initial invasion of Afghanistan. With regard to Iran's proxy war against the U.S. in Iraq, former intelligence officer Steven O'hern (2008) provided a first-hand account (with some primary source data) of the U.S. struggle against this unseen adversary. The U.S. Army's official history of the war in Iraq (Rayburn, et al. 2019 a,b) gave a comprehensive rollup of the struggle between the U.S. and Iran, although this was by no means the central focus of the war effort. Ray Takeyh (2006) provided an analysis of Iran's internal politics and regional intentions during the first half of the decade, including their plans for Iraq. Scholar Thomas Mattair (2008) outlined the "grand bargain" that Iran proposed to the U.S. in 2003, among other key issues of policy analysis for the Iranian side throughout the decade.

The international controversy over Iran's nuclear program, and the first term in office of the firebrand President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also generated considerable press, as well. Media and think tank reports and speculation over Iran's program abounded, but Chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohamad El Baradei's (2011) memoirs (a partially primary source) provided a less partial view and additional insights with regard to his own interaction with Iranian leaders. Mousavian's (2012) memoirs (previously mentioned) also complimented this account. With regard to Ahmadinejad and the internal politics of Iran under his leadership, Iranian journalist Kasra Naji (2008) provided a

bibliographical account of this president and his rise to power. University of Saint Andrews' Ali Ansari (2007) authored an insightful analysis of Ahmadinejad's politics of confrontation and controversy.

The fourth decade: 2009-2018

The fourth decade of the conflict was every bit as eventful as any that preceded it, especially as it produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA), the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West. As these events were relatively recent, books and memoirs are still being drafted for this decade, so this section will draw more heavily on news reporting for primary sources, along with analysis by the media and think tanks, as well. However, a considerable amount of secondary work is already available, as well. Journalist Hooman Majd (2010) gave an account of the Iranian point of view as Barrack Obama campaigned for the presidency and defeated his rivals, carrying into the 2009 election controversy in Iran and the rise of the Green Movement. Investigative journalism by Murtaza Hussein (2019) provided one of the best accounts available of Iran's role in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and the dynamics of having U.S. and Iranian troops on the same battlefield. Another investigative piece by Dexter Filkins (2013) has become the seminal work on the influential Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani. A think tank piece by Michael Eisenstadt (2016) compiles otherwise disparate accounts regarding Iran's bourgeoning cyber warfare program. Journalist Jason Rezaian (2019), who had been held prisoner in Iran from 2014 to 2016, provided unique insight into Iran's practice of imprisoning dual nationals as a new form of hostage taking.

Four sets of memoirs (partially primary sources) are particularly useful for helping to understand Obama's initial efforts at rapprochement and unravel the nuclear negotiations with Iran from the U.S. side. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2014) presided over U.S. foreign policy as Obama attempted to thaw relations with Iran, only to see the process interrupted by the 2009 election controversy in Iran.

Among other things, Clinton discussed Obama's reaction to the Green Movement in Iran and the challenges of dealing with Israel throughout the process of attempting to bring Iran to the negotiating table. With regard to the nuclear negotiations, Senior diplomat Wendy Sherman (2018) devoted the most pages of her memoir to Iran, giving a feel for the human and cultural dimensions of the negotiating process. Senior diplomat William Burns (2019) dedicated a short but revealing portion of his memoir to his efforts in establishing a "back channel" for the stalemated negotiations to succeed. Secretary of State John Kerry's (2018) comments on the nuclear negotiations were relatively short, as well, but he provided important details of the overall process and the final push to achieve a deal during the publicly disclosed rounds of negotiations.

As already mentioned, Trita Parsi's (2017) work remains one of the most comprehensive account of nuclear negotiations between the U.S. (and its international partners) and Iran. His work offered both U.S. and Iranian perspectives, and it examined the role that Israel played in attempting to spoil the process. This prominence is rivalled only by Penn State's Dennis Jett (2018), who also provided a detailed account of the deal, although his work focused more on the politics of the U.S. side. For understanding the role that sanctions played in the U.S.-Iranian conflict and the nuclear issue, Cordesman (et al. 2014) provided one of the best summaries available of decades of both U.S. and international sanctions against Iran. Suzanne Maloney's (2015) work on Iran's political economy helped to elucidate the impact of these sanctions on the Iranian end.

Another resource that becomes especially salient in examining the fourth decade is the United States Central Command's (CENTCOM) annual posture statement (another primary source) to the House Armed Services Committee. This statement is largely a formality, but as an official report to the body that provides all of CENTCOM's funding, it often paints a revealing description of the command's priorities. By tracing the language used to describe the threat from Iran, one can get a feel for the way that not only CENTCOM, but the larger national security establishment, views the country. As Chapter 6

will show, these statements demonstrated a trend toward increasing hostility, even as the nuclear agreement went into effect.

Plan of the Dissertation

This dissertation will propose a framework for evaluating conflict from an institutional perspective, using the innovation of "constituencies to the conflict" as the primary vehicle. It will then conduct a trial application of this framework through an in-depth study of one prominent example of intractable conflict, the U.S.-Iranian relationship from 1979 to 2018. Finally, it will draw insights and conclusions from the exercise, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the institutional approach for studying intractable conflict, and consider the next appropriate steps toward the broader application of institutional theory within conflict analysis.

Whereas this chapter has spoken in general terms, Chapter 2 will develop a model for using the institutional approach to assess conflict. It will examine how institutional theory has been previously utilized within Political Science and will discuss the challenges of applying this this theoretical framework to the analysis of international conflict. It will introduce the nature and importance of constituencies to the conflict, and it will introduce five specific constituencies that have developed within the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Chapter 3 will cover the first decade of the U.S.-Iranian conflict. This time period contains the roots of the institutionalization process that would unfold over the coming decades, and it will focus on key events that influenced this process. It will briefly describe how these roots preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It will cover the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in Tehran, the bombings and kidnappings in Lebanon during the early 1980's, U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, the Iran-

Contra scandal, the Tanker War in the Persian Gulf, and the transition process that surrounded the death of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Chapter 4 will examine second decade of the U.S.-Iranian Conflict. It will show institutionalization taking hold, driven less by specific events and more by the constituencies outlined in Chapter 2. It will be organized by period instead of events, covering the presidential administration of George H. W. Bush, the first term of President Bill Clinton, and the first time of President Mohamad Khatami in Iran. Each period will demonstrate key opportunities for rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran that came to naught.

Chapter 5 will look at the third decade of the conflict, again taking a period approach. It will examine the first term of President George W. Bush, during which time the U.S. and Iran had perhaps their greatest opportunity for rapprochement during the 40-year conflict, only slide into deeper hostility. It will then move to the first term of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, where the dispute over Iran's nuclear program began to take center stage in world politics and Iran sponsored a proxy war against the U.S. in Iraq. In spite of these developments, though, both sides demonstrated a desire for a more cooperative relationship, only to be stymied by institutional forces.

Chapter 6 will cover the final decade in a similar fashion. President Barrack Obama brought new hope as he attempted to thaw relations with Iran, but domestic politics on both sides made this all but impossible. During his second term, the successful negotiation of a nuclear agreement between Iran and the U.S. (and its international partners) called into question the entire premise of intractable or institutional conflict. The peacemakers had carried the day. Yet the subsequent deterioration of relations, culminating in President Donald Trump's abnegation of the nuclear deal, demonstrated that institutional forces continued to shape the conflict through the end of the period in question.

Chapter 7 will conclude the dissertation by considering some key questions. It will examine the implications of the case study findings with regard, first to the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and second to the institutionalization of conflict in general. It will assess the utility of the institutional lens for conflict analysis and critique the model introduced in Chapter 2. Finally, it will consider areas for further research in the continued development of institutional tools for the study of conflict.

CHAPTER 2 - THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter will explain how conflicts become intractable by harnessing the tools of institutional theory. Conflict is endemic to the human condition and a fixture of the international system, but most interstate clashes are relatively short-lived. Only a minority maintain a high degree of hostility for decades or even generations. This persistence is often difficult to explain, especially when key actors change and participants on both sides may argue that a resolution would be in the best interest of all parties. This chapter will show that a conflict becomes intractable when it develops the qualities of an institution. Institutions foster durability in a changing world by creating their own frameworks of rules and expectation that are largely impervious to external influence. They develop constituencies which subordinate larger societal interests to a common cause, becoming greater than the sum of their parts. When constituencies with an interest in perpetuating the conflict and the power to influence the policies of their state develop on both sides, the conflict becomes intractable. The U.S.-Iranian relationship between 1979 and 2018 provides an example of this process.

The following sections will develop an institutional lens for the study of conflict and propose a model for use in examining the nature of intractability. It will then apply this model to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, introducing five specific constituencies and describing their place within an institutional framework. This will lay the groundwork for the next four chapters, which will follow their stories over the course of 40 years.

Toward an Institutional Theory of Conflict

What sort of a framework can institutional theory offer to the study of conflict? Institutions are largely abstract in nature, and institutionalization is a quality better described than measured. In essence, this dissertation will take an abstract concept and use it as a lens for examining concrete realities. Lenses may not be easily falsifiable, but they can be judged for their within-case explanatory power and their utility in comparison to other lenses. A good lens consistently illuminates the dynamics of a case and reasonably accounts for outcomes that defy the logic of the theory. It offers a unique contribution, but instead of supplanting all other lenses, it may be complimentary to some existing approaches. This particular lens will embody the concept of an institution for practical application and demonstrate how institutions develop within the context of an international conflict.

This section will proceed with a brief examination of the intersection between institutional theory and Political Science. It will introduce several schools of thought that have developed with regard to institutions and argue that Historical Institutionalism offers the most promise for the study of intractable conflict. It will discuss some of the challenges of making this application and propose a model for harnessing the power of tools to understand cases like the conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

Institutional theory in International Relations

The word "institution" is often used but rarely defined. Organizations or governing bodies are commonly referred to as institutions with little delineation between the two concepts, except that the word institution is usually associated with longevity or staying power. Within Political Science, usage of the term has run the gamut from describing tangible bodies, such as the U.S. Congress (Riker 1980, 444)

to intangible concepts, such as secure property rights (Acemoglu, et al. 2005). Institutional arguments have also been commonly extended to explain complex effects like economic inequality (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Barnett and Finnemore (1999) proposed a theoretical distinction between organizations and institutions, suggesting that organizations become institutions when they develop autonomy from their original scope and purpose, effectively taking on a life of their own. This criterion is inherently subjective, better described than strictly defined, but the idea that an institution is greater than the sum of its parts is central to most discussions of the concept.

In the field of International Relations (Rixen and Viola 2016, 6-7), the study of institutions has primarily focused on international regimes, related to either political economy or security, that have emerged in the post-World War II era. This has also run a similar gamut from concrete to abstract. Solingen and Wan (2016) offered the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank as tangible examples of successful international institutions. Krasner (2016) described the intangible primacy of state sovereignty within the international system as another type. Krasner's (1982) earlier work, along with Keohane (1984), did not use the term institution, but both authors described international regimes in institutional terms. They explained that these formal and informal sets of rules and conventions generate utility that often outweighs the short-term gains that might be accrued by defection, again becoming more powerful than the sum of their parts. This force of attraction can sometimes effectively bind the actions of states even without the need for strict enforcement mechanisms. Ikenberry (2001) extended this discussion (using the term "institutions") and presented institutions as the underpinning of durable and effective systems of international order.

Regardless of where an author falls conceptually in their treatment of institutions, one common denominator unites them all. The study of institutions is fundamentally a study of rules. This idea derives from a family of sociological theories, in which rules are seen as the binding agent for societal

organization. One particularly illustrative theoretical framework is known as "practice theory," developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu (1977) theorized that human groups develop a "habitus," which is a collective set of rules that place individuals into a larger social framework and govern appropriate behavior. The habitus effectively encodes the values and worldview of a group, and it has tremendous implications for the distribution of power. The habitus is self-replicating, perpetuating patterns of action (or "practice") through generations. However, the habitus is also a site of contestation. As Cornut (2017) pointed out, the process of replicating the habitus constantly exposes it to new external inputs, and while a habitus is broadly shared, each individual brings unique interpretations which have ripple effects across the group. Thus, even though the habitus provides a high degree of continuity through succeeding generations, it also has a dynamic quality. Paradoxically, the very act of replication through practice is also a process of continual reinterpretation and change, though it often takes place slowly and imperceptibly. Although modern institutional research predates Bourdieu, his "practice theory" and its articulation of the nature of rules in human behavior have widely impacted the field (See Lyke 2017 for an example).

Like Bourdieu, Social Scientists from across the spectrum took an interest in the systemic study of institutions in the 1960's and 1970's (Hall and Taylor 1996), when researchers began to ask why certain systems of practice in government and civil society become entrenched over the course of time. They wrestled with the question of how human agency interacted with the structure of society, primarily attributing stasis to structural factors. The field of study developed simultaneously along three broad lines, separated by disciplinary divides but overlapping in certain assumptions, namely that rules govern human behavior. Sociological Institutionalism argued that rules are culturally based, where socially developed systems of meaning shape human perception and action. Stasis is therefore a product of deeply ingrained habits and worldviews. Rational Choice Institutionalism (Greif and Laitin

2004), on the other hand, viewed humans as self-interested utility maximizers. When the rules of behavior drive each participant to seek their own benefit, an equilibrium results, much like the operation of Adam Smith's "hidden hand" in economics. Stasis is a condition of equilibrium, where relevant actors view the status quo as more beneficial than change. Sociological and Rational Choice Institutionalism are not opposites, however. Proponents of rational choice idealize the concept of utility as an objective value, but in practice, human interests and utility are conditioned by individual perception, which is influenced by culture. Advocates of the sociological approach likewise accept that humans will act rationally within their socially constructed framework.

Historical Institutionalism, although separately derived, combines certain aspects of the Sociological and Rational Choice alternatives. Hall and Taylor (1996, 938) define institutions under this school of thought as, "formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy." Instead of viewing institutions as derivative of culture or the structure of interests, Historical Institutionalism embodies and animates them in their own rite, giving them a leading role in the drama of human behavior. From a rational choice perspective, they provide information and shape the perception of utility. From a cultural perspective, they provide meaning and purpose. So where do these (virtually) embodied institutions arise from? One of the foundational concepts (Fioretos 2011) of Historical Institutionalism is that of "path-dependence." Today's choices shape tomorrow's options, and so on, and so forth. Institutions are historically constructed over time, carrying forward bits of the past in an iterative fashion, much like Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. Where rational choice focuses on ends, and the cultural approach focuses on beginnings, Historical Institutionalism requires a comprehensive study of the journey to explain institutions. This dissertation will primarily utilize the Historical Institutional approach.

Regardless of the school of thought, the study of institutions is an examination of why certain things stay the same in an ever-changing world. Institutions manifest themselves as islands of unusual stability in the shifting sand. But even the most established islands change, and it sometimes happens in dramatic and unexpected ways. Accounting for change within institutions is therefore one of the main challenges for institutional scholars. Perhaps the neatest and most common explanation, as put forth by (Greif and Laitin 2004), is that institutions change because of external shocks. This envisions institutions as internally insulated systems functioning as unified actors within their environment. These bodies have evolved to suit particular environmental conditions, and they resist change within a tolerable band of varying conditions. Major events or changes that exceed the tolerable range, however, will prompt a new round of evolution (or simply destroy the institution altogether). This explanation fits neatly with Rational Choice Institutionalism, which argues that institutions are sets of rules that produce and maintain equilibrium. When new forces exceed the capacity of the institution to maintain balance, the rules adapt to a new equilibrium.

The shortcoming of this theory of change, however, stems from the observation that institutions do change over time, even in the absence of notable external shocks, and sometimes in ways that appear inconsistent with a reaction to external pressures. Greif and Laitin (2004) addressed this "endogenous" institutional change by suggesting essentially that the wiring of an insulated system can become defective at various times, reducing an institution's ability to replicate itself and magnifying the effect of external shocks. Unfortunately, their model did not explain how or when internal wiring changes, and it still relied on external shocks, which are not always directly correlated with change. Mahoney and Thelen (2009) (also see Thelen and Streeck 2005) took a completely different approach. Harnessing Historical Institutionalism, they argued that institutions evolve over the course of time in a path dependent fashion and that understanding this evolution requires temporal analysis. Like Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, replication and evolution are processes that go hand in hand,

producing change at an often-imperceptible pace. Unlike Greif and Laitin's (2004) model, where change happens fitfully, interrupting a status quo of stasis (a pattern known as "punctuated equilibria"), Mahoney and Thelen (2009) envision institutions that are always in motion. Punctuated equilibria are not the process of change but only the outward manifestation of changes that were occurring beneath the surface all along.

How does endogenous institutional change occur for Mahoney and Thelen (2009, 14-16)? First, their work quietly broke the distinction between endogenous and exogenous change which shackled Thelen and Streeck's (2005) preceding work. Institutions do not operate in a vacuum, so delineating between internal processes and external shocks is unhelpful and often misleading. Institutions change according to certain patterns in relations to their environment, regardless whether shocks are internal or external. Second, their work viewed institutions as sites of continual contestation over the rules of the game, and for them, "What animates change is the power-distributional implications of institutions." Third, the results of this power struggle inevitably play out through four consistent modes or processes (verbatim from Mahoney and Thelen 2009, 15-16):

1. *Displacement*: the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones
2. *Layering*: the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones
3. *Drift*: the changed impact of existing rules due to shifts in the environment
4. *Conversion*: the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic redeployment

Thelen and Streeck (2005, 29) also offered a fifth mode of institutional change, *exhaustion*. This mode might best be described as a failure of evolution, where the inability of a rule set to adapt to changing environmental conditions leaves the institution so devoid of utility that it faces extinction. Even in death, however, institutions rarely disappear without a trace, and some trace elements can usually be found in other institutions that carry on.

As the next section will show, these mechanisms of institutional change are paradoxically the same mechanisms by which institutions are originally constructed, and through which they maintain their stability. When institutional dynamics are operating, these processes turn inward, building new structures of resistance to change in response to a shifting environment. The old adage, "the more things change, the more they stay the same," comes into full effect. Therefore, when one can detect and identify these processes at work, they serve as an indicator that a problem set is becoming institutional in nature. Rixen and Viola (2016, 4-6) argued in the introduction to their edited volume that Historical Institutionalism has considerable untapped potential for illuminating complex issues in the field of International Relations. This dissertation asserts that the analysis of international conflict is an area that is particularly ripe for institutional research. Mahoney and Thelen's (2009) model will serve as a basis for developing and institutional model that explains why conflicts become intractable.

Applying institutional theory to international conflict

Protracted international conflicts, especially those that seem to simmer at a low boil for years on end, are often said to be institutionalized, but can conflict itself become an institution? At first glance, the application appears more than apt. As the previous section has shown, the umbrella of institutionalism has been broad enough to encompass everything from specific organizations like the U.S. Congress to abstract concepts like secure property rights, that can only be seen or touched in derivative form. If one were to distill a working definition of institutions from this field of study within Political Science, it might look something like this:

> An institution is a rule or set of rules with the power to inspire and organize human behavior in a particular direction, providing the impetus for its own self-replication, and operating with relative autonomy from other sets of rules within the scope of its writ.

Put in analogical terms, an institution develops its own gravitational pull on human behavior and becomes greater than the sum of the parts within its orbit. This dissertation asserts that intractable conflicts in the international realm display these properties very consistently. Further, Historical Institutionalism lends itself particularly to the study of conflict because it highlights the contested nature of power that animates institutional growth. It is tautological to even mention that interstate conflicts are contests of power. They also incorporate power struggles at various levels of the societies involved. The energy that animates an institution is generated from the engine of competition over the rules of society.

This brings up another key observation about intractable conflict, in general. It must be mutually constructed, which means that parties on both sides of the conflict have to be invested in continuing the hostility. Great Britain and the people of Iran have a tortured history that long predates the Islamic Republic. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has periodically provoked the British, for example by attacking their embassy (Worth and Gladstone 2011), harassing their naval patrols (Crist 2012, 559-560)), supporting Hezbollah's kidnapping of British citizens in Lebanon (Ranstorp 1997), and fighting a proxy war against British forces in Basra (Rayment 2008). Yet few observers would describe the relationship between Britain and Iran as intractable conflict. The British showed little interest in confronting Iran (outside the context of multilateral sanctions over their nuclear program), so Iran's provocations gained little traction in stoking sustained hostility. For conflict to be an institution, both sides have to be linked by a common rule or set of rules. Intractable conflicts, however, do adhere to this principle, at least to some degree, especially the U.S. conflict with Iran.

The rule set underpinning institutionalized conflict need not be complex. The institution of secure property rights can be explained in a sentence or two, but its effects are far reaching and profound, spawning an endless stream of difficult questions and controversies. One might suggest

mutual defiance, hostility, or mistrust as rules that define intractable conflict. Further, as the U.S.-Iranian conflict will demonstrate in coming chapters, both sides have consistently treated the relationship as a zero-sum game, making concessions on either side very difficult. Few would argue that any of these potential rules fails to apply to a broad range of simmering conflicts, including India-Pakistan, Israeli-Palestinian, and a divided Korea. Instead of choosing one of these rules in isolation, this dissertation will consider the set together as a potential habitus for the institution of international conflict.

The next key question is how a conflict becomes an institution. Every conflict does not become intractable, and some are resolved quickly, suggesting that they never assumed a high degree of institutional properties in the first place. Each of the three institutional schools of thought discussed so far provides a different perspective on this question. The rational choice approach focuses on actor interests in the present. Trends perpetuate because a structure exists that makes defection from the norm either more costly or less certain than defending the status quo. Using the U.S.-Iranian relationship as an example, proponents of rational choice might argue that maintaining the conflict is more comfortable for both sides because they can better estimate the cost. This works best on the U.S. side of the conflict, where one can use a material basis for interest calculations. As the last chapter has shown, containing Iran is expensive. However, political leaders and their domestic supporters have become comfortable with these costs, whereas making peace with Iran carries risks. What if they renege on the deal? What would be the price of having to turn around and face an Iran reinvigorated by the dividends of peace?

The inadequacies of the rational choice approach are more apparent on the Iranian side. The price of conflict to Iranian society is proportionally higher. Of course, deprivation is a status quo embraced by revolutionary regimes, and one could argue that these costs have already been counted.

The real difficulty, though, is that most of the benefits accruing to Iranians for maintaining hostility are intangible. Making peace with the U.S. might improve the quality of life in Iran, but it would probably come at the cost of sacrificing Iran's regional aspirations or subordinating the country to an American-led system of world order. How does one measure the price of prestige or the value of legitimating a revolutionary ideology? This approach begs questions of how rationality and utility are judged. In fact, U.S. leaders have accused the Iranians of irrational behavior for decades, but as the following chapters will show, both sides have been affected by emotion and historical baggage in their interest calculations. Rational choice does not deal well with intangible motivations or explain the construction of interest perceptions. Also, even if rational choice explains the perpetuation of an institution, it offers little insight into why a particular state of equilibrium developed in the first place.

The cultural approach (Sociological Institutionalism), on the other hand, embraces the challenge of dealing with interest construction. In evaluating an institution of animosity, it would focus on societal roots, considering differences in history and culture that long predate the conflict. For the U.S. and Iran, it would certainly compare and contrast the Judeo-Christian worldview and that of Shiite Islam. It might look to ancient Persian history to help explain the Iranian self-conception with respect to their place in the region and the world. The ideological roots of Iran's revolutionary leaders would also be pertinent, as would the development of the U.S. as a world superpower after World War II. All of these factors could prove useful in helping to decipher the interest calculations that have underpinned four decades of hostile behavior, but the cultural approach is poor at predicting outcomes. Taken to the extreme, it lends itself to the argument that conflict between two incompatible cultures or religions is simply predetermined when they collide. This "clash of civilizations" (See Huntington 1993) viewpoint provides a seemingly neat explanation for the U.S.-Iranian conflict, but it is completely confounded by years of partnership between the U.S. and other Muslim countries like Egypt, or even Saudi Arabia, during the

same period. Institutions are constructed by decisions and events, not just ancient history or culture, and so are conflicts.

When searching for the roots of an institution of animosity, an approach guided by Historical Institutionalism offers the ideal lens. All conflicts have historical roots, whether deep or shallow, and most studies of conflict already involve some degree of historical analysis. This approach involves tracing developments over time, identifying critical junctures at which important choices create path dependence. In the case of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, it ties the past to the present and explain why a specific event that happened decades ago is still relevant to the conflict today. Far from discounting the utility of rational choice analysis, a historical approach can help to illuminate the true nature of the structure in which actors exercise their "bounded rationality" (see Simon 1979, 502). As this chapter will later show, a model based upon Historical Institutionalism will also cast light into which actors are having the greatest impact on the intractability of a conflict.

To understand how conflicts become institutions, one must first ask the broader question of where institutions come from, in general. This is where the modes of institutional change described by Mahoney and Thelen (2009, 15-16) and Thelen and Streek (2005, 18-29) demonstrate a utility far greater than their original conception. These are the fundamental mechanisms by which institutions evolve under any environmental condition, internal or external. The short answer is that institutions arise from other institutions that have evolved, merged, or been otherwise repurposed. Institutions are manifestations of the social habitus, which is always in motion, but rarely forgets its past. For this reason, they carry trace elements of the institutions that precede them, often in quirky or unpredictable ways.

Given this broader application, modes of "change" becomes a misleading label for these dynamics. Instead, this dissertation will consider them modes of *institutional operation*. They are the

mechanisms that first build, and then defend an institution. Once built, these dynamics operate like antibodies in the human immune system. They constantly evolve so the body does not have to, actively developing new forms of resistance against change. The following will describe how these modes will be repurposed toward the analysis of intractable conflict.

Displacement & Conversion are both closely related and describe how changing conditions challenge an institution's original raison d'etre or present the people associated with the institution with new and potentially more pressing threats or opportunities. In operational terms, displacement is a change in the rules that might happen quickly in some cases, but often lacks staying power when it does. Conversion is a more gradual and fundamental transformation. Because the line between the concepts is fuzzy, this dissertation will combine the two except where a distinction is warranted. For examples of *displacement and conversion*, America's Cold War military and foreign policy apparatus shifted heavily to the Persian Gulf and largely against Iran in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Iran's Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) shifted focus after the Iran-Iraq War to anti-Israeli and anti-American activities. On a more abstract level, the U.S. replaced Great Britain as the exemplar of imperial behavior in the eyes of the Iranian populace in 1953. Iran also replaced Iraq during the early 1980's as America's adversary and threat in the Persian Gulf.

Layering is a process whereby new developments are added or previously unrelated issues become linked to the conflict. Layering is most evident when one sees that the core issue of a conflict has changed over the course of time without lessening hostility. U.S. grievances against Iran shifted from terrorism in the 1980's, to human rights in the 1990's, to the nuclear issue in the 21st Century, to regional destabilization in the late 2010's. No layer was ever removed, however, and U.S. officials still mention all four as supporting evidence of Iran's overall malfeasance. Iran, likewise,

frames today's issues in yesterday's events, such as the 1953 Mossadegh coup and the 1988 shootdown of Iran Air 655.

Drift, as previously described, occurs when conditions gradually change but the rules remain rigid, causing the institution to function differently in its environment than it once did. In practice, it is the rotation of personnel associated with an institution that most engenders gradual change. New blood adopts the established interests and carries them forward, but their ideas will also be shaped by a different set of circumstances and societal pressures that the old guard they replace, and the application of these ideas will play out differently. The result can be an institution simultaneously both more and less congruent with the contemporary environment than it was in the past. As succeeding chapters will show, the changes of presidential administration in both the U.S. and Iran, as well as the evolution of leadership in Iran's IRGC provide examples of *drift*.

Exhaustion occurs when the conditions driving an interest in conflict change, but the adherents to the institution cannot or will not renew it through the other three processes. The constituency dies a natural death, and its energies are absorbed by communities with different interests. This has not occurred yet in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, but an example of *exhaustion* might be the royalists (supporters of the Shah's monarchy) from Iran after 1979. These individuals did not disappear, but their cause eventually became so hopeless and discredited that they dissipated to other political groups, leaving an empty shell of their former institution behind.

At the theoretical level, these modes of institutional operation are responsible for building institutions, but in the physical world, where does one pin down and locate the institutions of animosity that they create? Most of the literature that examines institutions focuses on specific organizations because they are tangible manifestations that can be bounded and studied. Where would an institution of animosity reside? The logical starting point might be the state level, where both sides would be

considered unitary actors. This is problematic when considering intractable conflict, though. Conflict is best identified as intractable when history produces examples of state leaders on both sides arguing that resolution of the conflict is in their national interest, but neither side has been able to accomplish it. Thus, an institution of animosity almost necessarily implies a bifurcation of interest between the states themselves and some other set of actors. Another solution might be to focus on a set of "special interest groups," but this would tie the conflict too closely to transient actors, and it could fail to explain historical continuity that spans decades.

Instead, this dissertation contends that conflicts develop communities of interest, hereafter referred to as *constituencies*, which foster and nourish institutional animosity on both sides of the conflict. Constituencies have one or more common identifying feature and an interest in perpetuating the conflict, meaning the conflict is the primary factor influencing the incentive structure of its members. As such, constituencies are by nature institutions themselves – drawn into the orbit of a larger and less tangible institution which shapes their habitus (and vice-versa) in systemic fashion. Constituencies are not discrete. They have fuzzy borders, their membership shifts over time, and they may overlap with other communities. They are recognizable, though. For example, John Mearsheimer (2018) identified “foreign policy elites” as the chief culprit in perpetuating the concept of liberal hegemony. Mearsheimer spelled out broad categories of inclusion and gave some examples, but his argument did not depend on spelling out whether person “A” was or was not a “foreign policy elite.” Finally, in order to be significant, a constituency must include actors with some power to influence the course of the conflict.

Where do constituencies come from? They evolve through the same mechanisms already discussed. In many cases, they come from preexisting communities that were interested in something else before they were drawn into the conflict in question. The Israeli lobby functioned in the U.S. prior

to DESERT STORM, but they developed a new stake in the U.S.-Iran conflict during the 1990's. In other cases, the conflict itself served as a magnet around which various individuals and groups coalesced. As this chapter will later the discuss, the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliates had institutional roots that predated the Islamic Revolution, but it was conflict with the U.S. and paranoia regarding a repeat performance of the 1953 Mossadegh coup that bound disparate groups into a single constituency. Again, Mahoney and Thelen's (2009) (and Mahoney and Streeck 2005) insights have demonstrated their versatility. While attempting to explain "endogenous" change, they actually discovered a blueprint for institutional development and evolution in general (because each mechanism requires a degree of exogenous input by definition). There is an old adage that *the more things change, the more they stay the same*. These authors' work reveals the manner by which institutionalization happens. A process of change paradoxically functions to solidify habits and patterns over the course of time, while constantly incorporating new inputs.

The implications of institutional conflict and expected outcomes

This dissertation contends that conflict becomes intractable to a greater degree as it assumes the properties of an institution. Conflict becomes institutionalized when the gravity it generates draws pre-existing institutions (constituencies) into its orbit and binds them with a habitus geared toward perpetuating hostility. For the conflict to become a full-fledged institution of animosity, this must take place simultaneously on both sides. Constituency development need not happen at the same rate on both sides, but it must converge at some point in order to achieve the synergy required for self-

replication.[3] A conflict may also spawn its own, apparently original constituencies, but even these must ultimately draw their substance from somewhere else, in institutional fashion.

The degree to which a conflict becomes institutionalized depends upon two factors. First, the power of constituencies within the institution of animosity to influence foreign policy on either side of the conflict will determine their overall effect. Second, the symmetry of the constituencies arranged on both sides of the conflict will provide the mutual reinforcement necessary to perpetuate hostility. A conflict with powerful constituencies on each side will be highly resistant to resolution, regardless of the costs imposed on the societies involved. In studying a conflict, this condition should produce three expected outcomes:

1. Constituencies will consistently and actively undermine opportunities for cooperation or rapprochement, even when these options present a greater good for society, as long as the institution of animosity is operative.
2. Breakdowns in cooperation or rapprochement will not be arbitrary. They will result from a preceding chain of events, demonstrating path dependence. Present failures will also contribute to future outcomes.
3. Efforts to scuttle cooperation or rapprochement will be evident on both sides of the conflict, regardless of who initiates the opening, demonstrating the mutual construction and reinforcement of the institution.

[3] A conflict inevitably impacts the habitus of various social groups on both sides. This will not happen in the same manner or the same rate for every group. Constituency development will almost certainly occur faster on one side than the other. However, a conflict with constituencies on only one side is not an institution. The individual constituencies may be institutions, but when these dynamics are unilateral, the other side is not compelled to act against its interests in furtherance of the conflict. The conflict only becomes intractable when the obstacles to peace are spread across both sides and begin to act in concerted fashion, and constituencies then feed off of each other's energy to fuel the conflict.

On the other hand, what conditions would challenge the central claims of this dissertation? If a conflict identified as intractable exhibited developments inconsistent with the behavior of institutions, then this must be closely examined. Major breakthroughs in negotiations or peace accords should demand an explanation, and close cooperation on any major issue should also raise attention, although these occurrences would not automatically disprove the operation of an institution of animosity. Institutions live in an uncertain world where unexpected events can change circumstances in short periods of time. Like Goliath in the Biblical account of his showdown with David, constituencies do not always win, even when they appear to hold the winning cards. However, constituencies do not just lie down and die. Functioning constituencies will challenge unprecedented steps toward rapprochement or cooperation, even when those measures initially appeared successful. Institutional analysis requires a long-term view of the relationship and does not consider events at face value. Also, constituencies do not just disappear. They have mechanism by which they might shift their priorities, but just as their interests came from somewhere, they have to go somewhere. A vanishing constituency that cannot be accounted for would be problematic for an institutional approach to conflict analysis.

Finally, one might challenge the very premise of an institution of animosity by noting its essential similarities to other theories. After all, should it be surprising if conflict becomes intractable when powerful actors on both sides wish it to be so? What an institutional lens makes clear is these actors do not arbitrarily appear on the scene. Nor is their success a foregone conclusion. Intractability is a paradoxical condition in which parties that ostensibly hate each other act in concert as part of a larger system. If conflict becomes institutional, then these parties are subject to a set of rules and mechanism that determine the manner of their evolution. The significance to such a theory lies not only in the explanation of how conflicts become intractable but in how they might eventually be resolved. Understanding the evolutionary process and the life cycle of constituencies can illuminate the art of the possible because constituencies are necessarily deconstructed through the same processes by which

they were constructed. Further, it might be possible in some cases to anticipate and prevent the formation of constituencies altogether.

The challenges of this approach

The primary challenge to developing an institutional theory of intractable conflict, and the key focus of this dissertation, is discovering why some conflicts become intractable, whereas most do not. All conflicts involve institutions, and they inevitably impact the evolution of those institutions, but only some conflicts actually become an institution. Presumably, most conflicts develop constituencies to one degree or another, as well. What conditions drive the tipping point in which one can say without a doubt that powerful constituencies on both sides of the conflict have produced an institution of animosity? This dissertation will examine the role of constituencies on either side of the U.S.-Iranian conflict over four decades to determine the nature of their role in causing conflict intractability. By tracing the development and impact of these constituencies, it will seek insights into the conditions by which constituencies lead to intractable conflict. Theorizing this causal relationship will allow the dissertation to offer suggestions into the most productive routes for constituency deconstruction and conflict resolution.

A secondary challenge, and one that is far more easily surmountable, is the appropriate selection of constituencies to study. Unlike organizations, which can sometimes be studied empirically to develop insights into the abstract institutions that drive them, constituencies are less tangible. On one hand, this provides an advantage over the approach taken by rational choice models of conflict. If one were to employ interest mapping, using key individuals or organizations as the actors in the conflict, one could reduce the conflict to a single (albeit complicated) mathematical equation, the solution to

which would be a state of equilibrium among the interested parties. However, an accurate solution to such an equation would require perfect knowledge and representation of the parties involved in the conflict. If an actor were misplaced within the equation, or worse yet, missed entirely, it would change the entire outcome.

Constituencies, on the other hand, remain theoretical constructs, even though they are semi-tangible and historically traceable. Constituencies, following institutional logic, will also tend to converge, as various social groups and institutional processes overlap and affect each other. This does not mean that the selection of constituencies will not affect the outcome, but it means that it will be less consequential whether person "A" is grouped with person "B" or person "C." The constituencies are a lens for viewing mechanisms of institutional change operating at the system level, and these mechanisms will overlap groupings "A&B" and "A&C." One could verify this by historically tracing different combinations of constituencies, and this would undoubtedly produce some additional insights, but the returns to additional iterations would diminish quickly because the researcher would only be looking at the same system mechanics from different angles. This dissertation will use one set of constituencies, as outlined in the following sections.

Harnessing the U.S.-Iranian relationship as a case study

The merits of using the U.S.-Iranian relationship from 1979 to 2018 as a case of intractable conflict have already been explained, and with four decades of tumultuous history to examine, it spans multiple generations. This is a story that has been told many times (usually not in its entirety) from different perspectives, but the lens of Historical Institutionalism will offer a new approach. This dissertation will tell the institutional story of the conflict using the previously discussed model to process

trace each decade of the conflict, focusing on critical junctures, or key points at which a decision by one or both sides would have lasting implications for the direction of the relationship. It will especially examine the impact of path dependency on moments that presented an opportunity for cooperation or rapprochement between the two parties.

This study will follow five specific constituencies and focus consistently on the mechanisms of institutional change that shaped the conflict. It will collect observations about the functioning of constituencies, and in doing so, it will also serve as a test case for the institutional model presented in this chapter, considering challenges to the claims put forth within that model, as well. This will offer insights into the unanswered questions regarding the conditions under which a conflict becomes intractable, and it will facilitate an assessment with regard to the efficacy of the institutional lens to conflict analysis and implications for future theoretical work.

Constituencies to the Conflict

The purpose of this section is to introduce five constituencies to the institution of animosity between the U.S. and Iran. As previously explained, constituencies to the conflict are more than just interested parties. Much like DNA in human beings, they embody the defining characteristics of the relationship, and the structure of worldviews and incentives within the constituencies compels them to reproduce the conflict, even while accounting for an infinite number of variables in terms of possible events and outcomes. Even if you could bribe a constituency to leave the conflict, no one-time payment would likely be enough. Like DNA, constituencies change all the time (the very nature of their replication requires it), but this change happens according to consistent patterns and rules that govern the way they interact with the surrounding world. On the other hand, constituencies are unlike DNA

and human bodies in another critical sense; they are not discrete entities with fixed boundaries or shape. Individuals, and sometimes even groups, come and go from these constituencies over time, and there is no hard or fast criterion for determining exactly who is in and who is out. This makes defining a given constituency challenging. Ultimately, constituency itself is an abstract analytic tool applied to conflicts where institutional conditions obtain in order to better to understand the dynamics of that conflict. When a conflict can be studied over a long period of time, distinctions begin to emerge, and individual constituencies can be distinguished by patterns of behavior and action.

At what point, then, do interested parties become constituencies to a conflict? Again, there is no hard and fast rule. The guideline that this dissertation will use is that a party becomes a constituency when institutional processes give it a stake in perpetuating the conflict that is no longer directly tied to security interests based on rational choice. For example, the state of Israel has always had legitimate security interests and concerns with regard to Iran. However, it became a constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict in the 1990's when interests unrelated to its own physical security motivated its government leaders to increase their animosity toward Iran. These two sets of interests often coincided in a mutually reinforcing fashion, but there were clear cases in the 2000's and 2010's where Israel would have been more secure with a reduction in hostility toward Iran. The fact that its leaders would not countenance such a course correction suggested, not just ulterior motives, but a deeper institutionalization of the conflict - a growing degree of constituency over time.

How are constituencies delineated, one from another? In some cases, this is relatively intuitive. The U.S. Congress and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have almost nothing in common except a shared interest in defying each other. On the other hand, the IRGC and Iran's clerical establishment share links that are often difficult, even for Iranians, to untangle. Yet these two also have distinct roles and motivation, making their separation analytically useful. For the purposes of this

dissertation, constituencies can be delineated when they each possess at least one prominent and distinctive binding characteristic unrelated to the conflict, and most importantly, when it is useful to do so. As stated in the introduction, constituencies are not examined for their own sake. The purpose of identifying and studying constituencies is to gain a window into the larger institutional dynamics of a conflict and to help understand why some conflicts become intractable. Keeping this in mind will alleviate the burden of having to consider every possible candidate or combination of potential constituencies in order to generate usable knowledge and insights. A good model will produce a good picture. An alternative model may help refine the picture. Successive iterations will yield diminishing returns.

The model chosen by this dissertation includes five constituencies to the conflict. It deliberately excludes the presidents of the United States and Iran. This does not mean that there have been no institutional forces acting upon the presidents themselves, their administration, or especially the executive branch agencies under their control. However, presidents on both sides have consistently been bombarded with such a range of competing demands regarding their national interest that stoking mutual animosity has rarely been a high priority. In fact, even the most bellicose presidents (George W. Bush on the U.S. side and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the Iranian side) made at least some effort to resolve the U.S.-Iranian conflict. For this particular model, juxtaposing the actions and intentions of the executive branches on both sides against the influence of the constituencies to the conflict is the most illuminating route for explaining how the constituencies have been responsible for perpetuating the conflict. The constituencies this dissertation will examine on the Iranian side are the clerical establishment and the IRGC. On the U.S. side, it will focus on U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) along with the national security establishment that supports its efforts, the state of Israel, and the U.S. Congress.

Iran's clerical establishment

Iran's clerical establishment was arguably the primary instigator of and the first true constituent to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. This constituency was born of Ayatollah Khomeini's clerical supporters who took a leading role in the overthrow of the Shah, coming to power themselves with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This group was both fractious and diverse in its own rite, and its internal power struggles would shape the course of Iranian policy for four decades. Where they united, though, was first in their loyalty to Khomeini's vision, and second in anti-Americanism, which developed into a guiding principle. As a constituency to the conflict, the clerical establishment (as it will be referred to for the remainder of this work) broadly includes the leaders with religious credentials or ties who were active in Iranian politics. Some clerics, including critics of Khomeini, chose not to enter the political realm (many of the more prominent retreating to seminaries in Qom), and they will not be included. Some politicians had no religious training or credentials, but their ties to clerical families or patronage of politically active mullahs qualified them for inclusion. This delineation of the clerical establishment benefits from a key feature of the Islamic Republic's constitution. It established that the Council of Guardians (Thaler 2010, 29) will officially vet all candidates for national elections. The criteria for excluding candidates are often vague or arbitrary, drawing criticism from democracy advocates worldwide, but this also has the effect of homogenizing Iran's government. Politicians may disagree about a lot of things in Iran, but they will not serve in public office unless they are recognized by their peers as supporters of Khomeini's doctrine and vision.

The clerical establishment, as a constituency, owes its roots to the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), a political party specifically sanctioned by Khomeini (Milani 1994, 147-167) after his return to Iran. The IRP leadership was a who's-who of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers, including Ayatollah Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti (who chaired Iran's Supreme Court until his 1981 assassination),

Hojatolislam Seyyed Ali Khamenei (who became Iran's President and then Supreme Leader), and Hojatolislam Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who would eventually hold most of the senior positions in the Iranian government except for Supreme Leader). The IRP became the nucleus around which Khomeini's supporters coalesced as they struggled to secure the reins of power in Iran, first against the secular nationalists, and second against the leftist factions. Secular nationalists (Milani 1994, 147-151) (Axworthy 2013, 157-158) advocated Western-style republican democracy, which hearkened back in Iran to the Constitution of 1906. This faction was led by Mehdi Bazargan, the Prime Minister of the provisional government after the fall of the Shah, and if left unchecked, they would have limited the influence of the clergy in Iranian politics. While both the leftists and nationalists competed with the IRP, the leftists threw in their lot with the IRP against Bazargan's government. As Chapter 3 will show, the student takeover of the U.S. Embassy in November 1979 was the key milestone in the total defeat of this faction.

In early 1980, Abolhassan Bani Sadr (Amanat 2017, 793-798), a non-clerical intellectual, was elected Iran's first President. Bani Sadr was a supporter of Khomeini, and for a time enjoyed his blessing, but he also had liberal leanings and was intent on building a viable, functioning government. As Bani-Sadr attempted to assert presidential authority, he immediately butted heads with the clerics of the IRP, who preferred to treat political power as the spoils of the revolution. While Khomeini supported him occasionally (usually not), he steadily lost ground to his rivals, eventually casting about for support from nationalists and leftists. This power struggle continued until June 1981, when Bani Sadr (who had already fled the country in hiding) was impeached on charges of treason. Khomeini outlawed all political parties except the IRP (Fairbanks 1998, 20-22) and cracked down on dissent. The leftists, led primarily by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), had been steadily sidelined from Iranian politics and now found themselves locked out entirely. They struck back (Milani 1994, 187-189) by bombing an IRP conference, killing or wounding a number of Iran's senior leaders and beginning a campaign of

terror. This inaugurated a civil war which raged for the next year, leaving the MEK defeated and effectively driven from Iranian soil. With the regime's most dangerous enemy vanquished, Khomeini then turned on the more passive leftists, the Tudeh Party (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 95-96) (Amanat 2017, 805-806), with a campaign of arrests, torture, and forced recantations which finished communist influence in Iran, as well.

Each stage in the consolidation of the clerical establishment's power generated new utility for stoking Iran's conflict with the United States. Chapter 3 will explain how the clerical establishment began to coalesce into a full-fledged constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, beginning with Khomeini's decision to support the takeover the U.S. embassy and resulting hostage crisis. It will show that victory on the domestic front did not unite Khomeini's supporters, but instead exacerbated factional divides. Within this power struggle, radicalism became a form of currency, and this was directed largely at the U.S. - a trend that continued through Khomeini's death in 1989. Chapter 4 will then explain how President Rafsanjani attempted to bring Iran back into the international fold and thaw relations with the West. It will show that, in many ways, he was stymied by his own clerical establishment, which developed an interest in keeping Iran isolated. In 1997, Iran had another opportunity as reform-minded President Mohammad Khatami came to office. Again, the clerical establishment saw its own interests threatened and undermined rapprochement with the West.

Chapter 5 will follow the end of the Khatami years and show how a conservative resurgence suppressed hopes of reform in Iran, leading to the election of the hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ironically, the many of the hardliners wanted rapprochement with the West, as well, but they wanted it on their own terms. They proved consistently willing to undermine relations with the U.S. when it served their domestic interests. The second half of the 2000's proved to be one of the most contentious periods between the U.S. and Iran, with increasing conflict over the nuclear issue and a

proxy war against the U.S. in Iraq. Chapter 6 will explain how a second conservative consolidation undermined the efforts of U.S. President Barrack Obama to improve relations and garner a nuclear deal. It will also show that, in spite of the unexpected breakthrough with a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the West, the clerical establishment still fostered sinister currents in domestic politics that would bode poorly for relations with the U.S.

IRGC and the clerical security forces

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) emerged from the Islamic Revolution to become the premier security force (against both domestic and foreign threats) for Khomeini's regime. The IRGC was not the only security service directly to linked to the clerical establishment, so this constituency must include other clerical security forces, as well, particularly the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and the Basij paramilitary force (which would formally merge with the IRGC in 2007, but maintained a distinction until that time). Like the clerical establishment, the story of their constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict also dates back to the formative days of the Islamic Republic, but it is more difficult to pick a specific event. These organizations were themselves products of institutional processes, and U.S.-Iranian hostility entwined with their development and maturity. The common theme for this constituency was that conflict with the U.S. provided a ready-made vehicle for ensuring their place of prominence in Iranian politics and defending against challenges to their relevance or legitimacy. Anti-Americanism was often less about actually defeating the U.S. or even protecting Iran's homeland, and more about a domestic struggle for power and interest. This section will briefly trace the early institutional development of the IRGC and clerical security forces in order to situate their role in the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

Ayatollah Khomeini (Ottolenghi 2011, 5) (Axworthy 2018, 34) (Schahgaldian et al. 1987, 17-27) began to establish the IRGC almost immediately upon his return to Iran in February 1979 as a hedge against the former Shah's military and a loyal force through which to exert power. Literature on the Islamic Republic often seems to suggest that the IRGC sprang into existence, almost from nowhere. While it is true that soldiers of the Shah were specifically excluded from the group, this image of an influential organization suddenly appearing flies in the face of the institutional theory upon which this dissertation is grounded, and it is misleading. Khomeini might have birthed the IRGC in name and form, but its initial membership and experience drew heavily from a network of existing resistance and militia groups.

The most influential precursor (Katzman 1993, 32-35) was the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Revolution (MIR), which broke from the leftist Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) starting in 1977 because its members preferred Khomeini's brand of Islamism to the more secular orientation of their parent group. This foundation was important because the MIR brought its own set of values to the fledgling IRGC. Although rejecting secularism, MIR was still rooted heavily in the radical Marxist movements of the period, embracing concepts like egalitarianism, support for the oppressed, economic justice, and opposition to the superpowers, institutional *layers* which contributed to the doctrine of the IRGC. Some of the MIR members had also trained with the PLO in Lebanon and had experience as urban guerillas resisting the Shah. These radicals were instrumental in starting some of the factional militias that coalesced into the IRGC, and they did not need Khomeini to tell them they should dislike the U.S.

The turbulence resulting from the fall of the Shah led to the proliferation of private militias, mostly armed (Schahgaldian et al. 1987, 17-27) by raiding the Shah's army depots, which jockeyed for influence in the future of Iran. Buoyed by Khomeini's support, the IRGC established dominance (Ostovar 2016, 57) in this chaotic environment, consolidating its own ranks and disarming other groups. The

IRGC's first notable military mission (Ottolenghi 2011, 8-9) was the suppression of an ethnic uprising by Kurdish separatists that had been spurred by the revolution. The IRGC found itself woefully unprepared, but with a combination of zeal and enthusiasm, they eventually distinguished themselves in comparison to Iran's regular army. In a bitter campaign that lasted until well into 1982, the IRGC cemented its reputation, killing an estimated 5,000 fighters and 1,200 civilians, and bringing the Kurds to heel. The IRGC also developed a strong role in domestic security. After the June 1981 bombing that killed a number of prominent IRP members (O'hern 2012, 32-33) Khomeini unleashed the guards against to the MEK. By the end of the year, they had killed an estimated 2,500 MEK supporters and imprisoned thousands more. Within a year, the MEK ceased to function in Iran, and its effective forces were driven into exile. In the process, the IRGC developed its own intelligence unit (Katzman 1993, 80-83) to ferret out enemies of the regime. This was supposed to be merged with the MOIS after its formal founding in 1984, although this was never completed in practice. As Chapter 3 will explain, the IRGC developed its own land, naval, and air (primarily missile) capabilities and took the leading role in Iran's military confrontations.

While the IRGC served as the leading proponent of Khomeini's ideology, most Iranians lacked the credentials to join this elite unit, even if they wanted to. The task of proliferating regime ideology throughout Iranian society fell to the paramilitary Basij organization. At the end of 1979 (Wehrey, et al. 2009, 26), Khomeini called for a 20 million-man army to defend the regime from its external enemies (especially the U.S.) and internal enemies of the revolution. While the Basij never reached this scale, it did manage to mobilize an impressive portion of the population (Ostovar 2016, 84-86), enrolling an estimated three million Iranians by 1986 with 600,000 actively serving. Most of its members hailed from the rural poor (O'hern 2012, 31), so the Basijis did much of their fighting in the Winter months, outside of crop seasons when they returned to their lands.

Khomeini formally placed the Basij under IRGC control in 1980 (Schahgaldian et al. 1987, 87-100), and its members served as foot soldiers in a variety of roles during the Iran-Iraq War, often bearing the brunt of the most brutal combat. With limited resources, the training and equipping of Basijis generally took a backseat to ideological indoctrination. Aside from ensuring a steady flow of manpower to the front lines, the Basij operated as a system of social organization and control in every area of the country. For the first six years of the war (O'hern 2012, 37), patriotism and ideological zeal swelled the ranks of the Basij, but by 1986, the population was growing weary, and the Basij was forced to draft recruits and recall former members to active service. Unlike the IRGC, the Basij never engaged the U.S. directly and had little inherent reason for anti-Americanism. However, their ideological indoctrination translated Khomeini's international crusade so that even the poorest Iranians, with little concept of Americans in their own experience, would come to see the U.S. as the key enemy of Iran.

The last organization to consider within this category is the MOIS. This organization was less of an anti-American project than the IRGC, but it was important to the institutionalization of conflict for three reasons. First, the MOIS was responsible for tracking and countering enemies of Iran's regime both at home and abroad. In this role (Crist 2013, 82), U.S. intelligence attributed more than 80 assassinations of Iranian dissidents to the MOIS between 1980 and 1995, with many taking place in countries allied to the U.S. American observers have usually made little distinction between terrorism and the targeted assassination of dissidents, so this clearly fueled animosity. One particular RAND report was telling in this regard (Hoffman 1989, 3), stating: "So far as terrorism is concerned, there are no moderates or radicals in Iran. Terrorism is a state policy, agreed upon by most Iranian clerics because it was sanctioned by the Ayatollah Khomeini himself. Not only is terrorism endorsed by the government as a whole; but the various contending factions within the Iranian ruling elite have long used international terrorism as a tool to gain leverage against their internal rivals."

Second, the MOIS competed (Wehrey, et al. 2009, 30) with the IRGC in the factional politics of Iran, so this likely prompted the IRGC to become more radical and increase its overseas activity. While the IRGC's mandate to export the revolution could be seen as complimentary to MOIS mandate to protect the regime (Wedge 2013, 141-142), both services answered to different clerical factions and masters, and both competed for resources and prestige. Third, the MOIS was itself an exemplary product of the institutional patterns under study throughout this dissertation, especially *displacement and conversion*. The Shah's intelligence and security service, SAVAK (Wedge 2013, 141-146), was a symbol of oppression for the Iranian people, and the revolutionary courts arrested and killed some of its top leadership in 1979. However, this organization possessed detailed files on the Shah's opponents, many of whom would become Khomeini's opponents in the first two years of the Islamic Republic. It also had readily established informant networks and a professional cadre of intelligence officers, some trained by the U.S. and Israel. In spite of revolutionary rhetoric, SAVAK was far too grand a prize to be squandered. Certain clerics within Khomeini's camp brought the organization under their wing, gave it a new name and a fresh purpose, and kept many of its personnel securely employed in their original line of work. There is no shortage of irony in the fact that many of the Islamic Republic's counter-intelligence successes in disrupting U.S. spy networks since the 1980's traced a direct lineage to training and professionalization that U.S. advisors once provided.

Chapter 3 will explain how the Iran-Iraq War, and to a lesser degree, Lebanon, shaped the IRGC (inclusive of the other clerical security forces) into an institution unto itself and made it a constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict. Chapter 4 will explain how these forces redefined their role in the peaceful years of the 1990's, becoming the power behind the throne for the clerical establishment and deepening their own interests in Iran's external isolation. Chapter 5 will show how the IRGC confronted the U.S. militarily through a proxy war in Iraq, and in the process defied the U.S.-led security architecture of the Middle East. They also developed Iran's nuclear weapons program, in direct defiance of both the U.S.

and international community. Chapter 6 will explain how the IRGC expanded Iran's influence across the Middle East, especially propping up the Assad regime in Syria, and how it confronted U.S. designs for the region. It will also explain how the 2015 nuclear agreement factored into its long-standing conflict with the U.S.

CENTCOM and the U.S. national security establishment

The conflict between the U.S. and Iran has fundamentally shaped the U.S. national security establishment, developing a strong constituency for perpetual hostility with Iran. While these effects have occurred far and wide, there is no single organization that has so embodied the institutionalization of this conflict on the U.S. side than the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for the greater Middle East region. For simplicity's sake, this dissertation will also consider other national security activities related to Iran that were not technically controlled by CENTCOM in the same category, as they mutually reinforced the trends displayed most prominently through the command itself. Unlike the IRGC, which overtly indoctrinated its members to oppose the U.S., manifestations of institutionalized conflict were more subtle and less deliberate on the American side, masking the power of institutional forces to shape events and creating a false sense of objectivity. However, conflict with Iran provided arguably the greatest impetus for the formation of this command, and these processes fundamentally shaped the character and development of the U.S. national security architecture to situate Iran as one of America's primary adversaries throughout the world. As seen with the IRGC, new institutions do not simply appear from nowhere. This section will show how CENTCOM's formation and early roots helped position it to become a primary constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

Following World War II (Gold 1988, 8-10, 27), the Cold War division of labor left the security of the Middle East region primarily to Great Britain. As the British divested themselves of colonial interests, the U.S. gradually inherited this role, but only in piecemeal fashion. U.S. attention to the Middle East lagged behind other regions for decades, and instead of developing an overarching strategy, U.S. policymakers primarily reacted to emerging events and threats. With regard to Iran, the U.S. built close relations with Shah after helping return him to power in 1953, and in spite of limited pressure by the Kennedy and Carter administrations (Amanat 2017, 584, 646) with regard to human rights, Cold War exigencies almost completely defined the relationship. Richard Nixon (Kimball, 2006) perhaps best epitomized this focus with his "Nixon Doctrine," establishing that the U.S. would support overseas allies with economic and military aid instead of ground troops. This doctrine played out in the Middle East by relying on Iran as an enforcer of regional stability. In a 1972 phone conversation (*Foreign Relations of the U.S.* 2006), Nixon offered the Shah advanced weapon systems and famously beseeched him to, "protect me." The Nixon administration also courted Saudi Arabia as one of the "twin pillars" of Middle East security, but the Saudis were far less amenable than the Iranians. Gold (1988, 18, 25-26) pointed out that Nixon's primary concern with regard to Soviet intentions in the Middle East was subversion and opportunism. The threat of a massive invasion diminished, but the presence of 15-20 Soviet Divisions in the Transcaucasia region provided ample incentive for caution.

When Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, U.S. policymakers (Cordesman 1998) had already begun to question the adequacy of the Nixon Doctrine as a replacement for U.S. force projection capabilities, recognizing a gap in U.S. abilities to respond to crises in the Middle East. Responsibility for the region rested uncomfortably in the seam between European Command and Pacific Command (Bliddal 2009, 59), neither of which considered it a priority. One of Carter's earliest presidential directives (The White House 1977) started the process of building what would become the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) which would allow for, "a deployment force of light divisions with strategic mobility

independent of overseas bases and logistical support, which includes moderate naval and tactical air forces, and limited land combat forces." The incremental establishment of this new organization required organizational changes within the Department of Defense (Davis 1982, 14-19) that included establishing the position of Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, which would steadily evolve into a leading power center within the department.

As with any organizational (and in this case institutional as well) change, the development of the RDJTF faced opposition from defenders of the status quo. This separate organization would draw its forces from the same pool of troops as existing commands, almost certainly fostering a competition for resources. Record (1983, 11-16) distilled many of these dissenting views, arguing that this enterprise was a costly distraction from Cold War priorities and would raise tensions in the Middle East if the U.S. brought troops into the region. World events, however, favored the project. The fall of the Shah and the hostage crisis in Iran, along with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which brought the Soviet Union to Iran's doorstep, shook the entire worldview of the U.S. national security establishment. A 1979 National Security Council assessment (U.S. NSC 1979) placed Iran and Afghanistan at the center of an "arc of instability," threatening the entire region. In January 1980 State of the Union Address, Carter (1980) established what would become known as the "Carter Doctrine," stating clearly that , "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

In March 1980 (Davis 1982, 14-19), the RDJTF established its headquarters under the command of Lieutenant General Paul X. Kelley as a subordinate to U.S. Readiness Command (USREDCOM). Regardless of the 1979, Islamic Revolution (Record 1983, 12), the key focus of RDJTF planning remained preparation to defend Iran against occupation by the Soviet Union. The Carter administration (Gold

1988, 33-34) began laying the diplomatic groundwork for this organization by securing access agreements that provided air and naval logistics hubs in Kenya, Oman and Somalia, as well as securing a tacit agreement with Egypt. In the final days of the administration, they played heavily upon regional anxieties regarding Iran to make inroads with Gulf states (Armstrong 1981), as well, especially Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Just prior to Ronald Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, Carter signed another two directives (The White House, PD 62 & 63, 1981) clarifying the direction of U.S. policy. Significantly, stabilizing the Middle East now took a leading role in countering the Soviet threat, NATO allies would be expected to shoulder a larger share of their own defense as the U.S. shifted focus, and the U.S. would look to new regional partners for support, mainly Saudi Arabia.

Even while openly denouncing the policies of his predecessor, Ronald Reagan quietly embraced almost every aspect of the Carter doctrine. Crist (2012, 55) argued that, "Reagan understood the havoc Iran wreaked upon his predecessor, and the president took an unusually keen interest in the formation of a military command for the Middle East." In his first year in office, Reagan's administration made the RDJTF an autonomous command (no longer subordinate to USREDCOM) (Davis 1982, 14-19) and secured an additional $700 million (Crist 2012, 51) for base construction in the Middle east Region. The RDJTF (Cordesman 1998) also expanded its area of responsibility, to include most of the Middle East and the horn of Africa, along with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In January 1983 (Gold 1988, 37-38), the RDJTF officially became a four-star regional combatant command, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

CENTCOM's first two years under General Robert Kingston (Cordesman 1998) (Gold 1988, 45-53), in spite of bureaucratic hurdles, saw troop allocations almost double. Under the RDJTF (Cordesman 1998), U.S. forces had already begun conducting training exercises throughout the region with partner nations, including Bright Star, hosted by Egypt, which became a fixture of the military relationship for decades to come. CENTCOM (SASC 1986, 624-625) increased the scope and pace of these efforts, and

by 1985, it was conducting multinational exercises in the Middle East that included over 60,000 U.S. servicemembers at a cost of $58 million. Congress also supported the effort to build regional security partnerships by steadily increasing the amount of money allocated to security assistance within CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

Concurrently with the organizational development of CENTCOM, the Reagan administration also continued Carter's diplomatic efforts to build support within the Middle East. Power projection required basing and overflight rights. The administration (Oberdorfer 1981) began aggressively courting Pakistan, offering a package of $500 million in military aid, and in spite of considerable opposition within Congress (Associated Press 1981), secured approval to sell them 40 F-16 fighter aircraft. Saudi Arabia (Ottaway 1981a) was quick to request advanced military equipment from the U.S. The Reagan administration obliged (Goshko 1981), fighting a pitched battle with Congress to secure approval of an $8.5 billion package including five Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) aircraft (this sale was opposed by Israel). It is unlikely coincidental that less than two years after the 1979 revolution led to the cancellation of the Shah's order for seven AWACS aircraft (Branigan 1979), Saudi Arabia's bid for five of the same models was approved. American manufacturers (Anderson 1981) lobbied for the deal, and this clearly suggests an example of institutional continuity that transcended geopolitical events. In total, a *Washington Post* (1981a, Nov 1) report estimated a sum of greater than $47 billion in weapons contracts, support, and facilities applied to cooperation with the Gulf Arab States alone, beginning under the Carter administration.

This influx of American weapons and personnel into the Persian Gulf region was not without controversy. In order to placate their own populations, the Gulf Arab States walked a delicate tightrope, pretending to hold the U.S. at arms' length. A Washington Post (Armstrong 1981) exposé on the secret military relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia brought swift denials from both Saudi Arabia

and the U.S. (Washington Post 1981b, Nov 2), although the original story turned out to be largely correct. In what may have been a face-saving gesture, Saudi Arabia (Ottaway 1981b) offered Oman $1.2 billion to cancel a partnership agreement with the U.S. that allowed access for U.S. forces to Omani facilities. In public, Saudi Arabia preferred to keep U.S. forces over the horizon. In private, however (Crist 2012, 98), the U.S. had servicemembers working in civilian clothes and billeted in Saudi hotels for most of the Iran-Iraq War. Like Carter before him (Gold 1988, 62-65), Reagan astutely utilized threats emanating from the Iran-Iraq War, such as Iran's attacks on shipping and the 1984 aerial gunfight between Saudi Arabia and Iran to increase U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf. This had the follow-on effect, however, of drawing the U.S. into pre-existing rivalries between Iran and the Gulf States, an inadvertent institutional *layering* of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

CENTCOM began the decade (as the RDJTF) as a child of the Cold War. Changes in Iran provided the impetus developing a new combatant command because they altered the strategic calculus within this worldview. The new focus on the Middle East (and ironically defending Iran from a Soviet invasion) required a set of regional partners with expanded capabilities. Conversely, it was the threat of Iran, not plans for its defense, that drove Gulf Arab States into the arms of the U.S., and CENTCOM became the vehicle for developing these partnerships. By partnering closely with Iran's hostile neighbors, however, the U.S. built a regional security architecture that increasingly bifurcated the Middle East, entrenching conflict with Iran and making it almost impossible to improve relations. Further, Iran helped propel this new command from a global backwater to the center of U.S. national security priorities (and spending), and the business of countering Iran would help ensure it retained this status, even as other conflicts ebbed and flowed.

Chapter 3 will explain how events in the U.S.-Iranian conflict overlaid the institutional development of CENTCOM, and by the end of the 1980's shifted its focus from the Soviet Union to Iran

through the process of *displacement and conversion*. Chapter 4 will show the deepening of this institutionalization which occurred in the 1990's, as war with Iraq prompted a massive and permanent expansion of the U.S. presence in the region. Chapter 5 will explain how CENTCOM's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during the 2010's changed the regional balance, invited interference from Iran, and deepened Iran's international isolation. Chapter 6 will explore why the U.S. and Iran could not collaborate in the fight against ISIS in the 2010's, and how CENTCOM increased its hostility toward Iran, even as the historic nuclear agreement should have lowered it.

Israel

The state of Israel has undeniably been a key player in fostering and maintaining the conflict between the U.S. and Iran over the first four decades of the Islamic Republic, and the benefit certain leaders have derived from perpetuating hostilities has made it an important part of the picture. Trita Parsi, whose body of work will form the backbone of the Israeli analysis in later chapters, argued (Parsi 2007) that Israeli influence was the primary obstacle to better relations between the U.S. and Iran. Defining Israel as a constituency presents a challenge, though. From an institutional standpoint, there is no problem with a third state acting as a constituent in a conflict between two other states, and one can readily find examples where this has been the case in world affairs. The difficulty is defining the scope of the actual constituent. The state of Israel is not monolithic, and like the U.S., its governmental leaders and views have changed over time. One could choose to focus specifically on the influence of the Israeli lobby in the U.S., but this ignores the direct and overt role that some Israeli leaders, especially Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have played in stoking the fires between the U.S. and Iran. Therefore, in describing Israel as a constituent to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, this dissertation

is referring to a nexus between Israel's foreign policy establishment and the wide range of levers by which Israel has directly and indirectly influenced U.S. policy toward Iran. In institutional fashion, this nexus carried a set of interests entirely external to the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Iran and enmeshed them into the very habitus of a conflict not its own.

It is important to consider that Israel's position on Iran during the 1980's was almost a polar opposite of the position it would stake out for the next three decades. Israeli leaders deliberately and sometimes openly pressed the U.S. to improve its relationship with Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq War, resisting Reagan's "tilt" toward Iraq. Understanding how the state of Israel could make such a monumental shift during the 1990's requires an examination of the institutional forces and processes operating within its foreign policy establishment in the decades prior.

From its very foundation as a state, Israel appreciated the need for strategic partners. Surrounded by Arab states (Samaan 2018, 67), Israel began courting a relationship with the Shah of Iran as early as 1949. In the 1950's (Alpher 1989, 156), Israeli founding father David Ben-Gurion began to articulate what would come to be known as the "periphery doctrine." With hostile neighbors on all sides, it sought alliances with states two or three countries removed from its own borders to help balance against its immediate adversaries. The periphery doctrine evolved over time (Alpher 2015, 4-7), but it was consistently nested within the framework of Israel's political and strategic goals. These included building alliances with great powers, ultimately the U.S., and the network they developed gave them a Cold War bargaining chip with Washington. Another goal was the return of the Jewish diaspora to Israel, which it helped facilitate. More than just a means to an end, though, the doctrine of the periphery (Shlaim 2000, 194-195) was also an ideological response to Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arabist doctrine. The movement this inspired temporarily united Israel's adversaries, Syria and Egypt in 1958 and helped overthrow the Iraqi monarchy the same year, all increasing the threat on Israel's borders.

Israel formed a tripartite intelligence association in 1958 that included itself, Turkey, and Iran, variously known as the "Triangular Pact" (Samaan 2019, 279-280) and "Trident" (Alpher 2015, 13-15). The members carved out regional responsibilities for each other that focused on monitoring and countering the rise of Pan-Arabism and Soviet influence. Because of the sensitive nature of the Triangular Pact (Samaan 2018, 33-34), most of the coordination that occurred was handled through intelligence agencies, with Mossad as the chief proponent for Israel. This also reflected the culture of secrecy within Israel's political leadership and defense establishment. Per Shlaim (2000, 195), for Israel, Iran was the "jewel in the crown of the alliance of the periphery." Israel and Iran cooperated in a broad range of intelligence and security activities. Israel helped the Shah build his own intelligence service (SAVAK), partnered with the Shah in supporting the Iraqi Kurds, and facilitated the development of Iran's missile program. Iran provided Israel with a secure source of oil. Overall, however, Alpher (2015, 18-19) pointed out that the Triangular Pact was a lopsided alliance, with Israel giving more than it received in return. In many ways, the Shah kept Israel at arm's length (Samaan 2018, 67-70) (Parsi 2007, 54-60, 62), and while their cooperation was an open secret, distrust and anti-Semitism were never completely absent.

Alpher (2015, 18-19) surmised that, in many ways, the Triangular Pact was largely symbolic for Israel. It signaled to superpowers and regional actors alike that Israel was not alone, nor was it beholden to any one patron. It took on new importance (Parsi 2007, 68-72) in 1977, though, as Menachem Begin became Prime Minister of Israel. Under Begin's policies, the Israelis became more aggressive and less conciliatory to their neighbors. Unfortunately, this increased Israel's reliance on Iran at precisely the time the Shah began to lose his grip on power. Israeli leadership did not have a backup plan when the Shah fell in 1979.

Like the U.S. (Alpher 2015, 20-23), Israel was caught off guard by the fall of the Shah. Israeli intelligence, for all of its reach, had not bothered to penetrate Iran's religious establishment. Bakhtiar's provisional government cast about for help that Israel could not (and the U.S. would not) provide, even asking the Mossad to assassinate Khomeini. The Israeli diplomatic mission was forced to flee the country and Khomeini supporters burned its headquarters. Yet in all the turmoil and anti-Israeli rhetoric (Samaan 2018, 74 - 77) that followed the revolution, Israel strove mightily to maintain its relationship with Iran and build bridges with the new regime. In one example, only months after the revolution (Parsi 2007, 94), Israel returned tanks that the Shah had sent them to be refurbished. Rhetoric aside, even Khomeini and his supporters proved surprisingly receptive to some of Israel's overtures. Ibrahim Yazdi, a close confidant of Khomeini (Sobhani 1989, 143), quietly assisted Israeli officials during their rapid departure from Iran. In early 1980 (Kaye, et al. 2011, 14-15), a representative of Khomeini actually travelled to Iran and met with Prime Minister Begin, who approved shipments of both weapons and F-4 Phantom jet tires in direct contravention of stated U.S. policies, infuriating the Carter administration. In return, Khomeini allowed a large number of Jews to emigrate to Israel or the U.S. Chapter 3 will show that in the Iran-Iraq War, Israel consistently sided with Iran. They also helped embroil the U.S. in the Iran-Contra Scandal.

Another dimension of the tie between Israel and Iran concerned the Jewish diaspora in that country. Judaism in Iran (Bahgat 2005, 519-521) dates back to the sixth century B.C. when King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and forcibly resettled the Jewish nation. Jewish communities have existed in Iran since that time and prospered during various periods, though subject to the vicissitudes of different ruling dynasties. The rule of Reza Pahlavi (Shah), who came to power in 1926, inaugurated a time of relative peace and prosperity for Iranian Jews. Both Reza and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Shah) promoted secularism and modernity, and Jews in Iran became more integrated into society. Perhaps surprisingly, given this fact, many Jews actually developed leftist-intellectual leanings toward the 1970's

and opposed the monarchy. When the revolution arrived, Jews were split between support for the Shah and the opposition, with some even embracing Khomeini - rather naively assuming that he would promote democratic governance. Regardless, the Jewish community attempted to position itself politically for their greatest possible advantage. Many openly disavowed Zionism, and some attempted to position themselves in the new parliament, in which they were granted nominal representation.

Khomeini's rhetoric against Israel and Zionists was supposedly not aimed at Iranian Jews (Bahgat 2005, 521), but life still got harder for this population. Some were imprisoned and even executed. Axworthy (2013, 207-209) pointed out that under Khomeini, lower level preachers would stir the pot of anti-Semitism with relative impunity in order to make a name for themselves. In this environment of uncertainty (Foreign Office 1979, 8), many of the estimated 60,000-80,000 (some estimates go higher) preferred to emigrate. Supporting this repatriation became a high priority for the Israeli government in the months and even years following the revolution. Ironically, the exodus of some 20,000-30,000 Jews only fed into the Islamist narrative that Iranian Jews were Zionist sympathizers, making life more difficult for those who chose to stay. Ram (2007, 107-113) brought out the point that the emotional ties that Israelis felt toward Iran were distorted by a mismatch of worldviews. Most Iranian Jews valued their Persian identity as much or more than their Jewish identity, and many were frankly opposed to the Zionism altogether. The Israelis, on the other hand, tended to view Iranian Jews through the lens of their own cultural and religious project - lost sheep to be gathered back into the fold. In some cases, Israel even provided financial incentives (funded by evangelical Christian groups) to emigrate, confident that the diaspora would be converted. For the first half of the 1980's, this made Israeli leaders reticent to antagonize Iran and potentially endanger the remaining Jewish population.

All accounts of the periphery doctrine suggest that this concept was nothing short of an institution. It was never formally codified in writing, but it developed succeeding generations of

adherents who made it their own, adopting and defending the values and assumptions that underpinned the doctrine. The periphery doctrine shaped and molded the incentive structure for Israel's political elite, partly because participation in this level of diplomacy was a status symbol reserved for the highest echelons, and partly as well because it shaped the way that these leaders built and leveraged their own networks of personal contacts. The entrenchment of the doctrine was path dependent. It started as a small intelligence partnership with mostly symbolic value but took on new dimensions at junctures over time, including energy security, weapons development, and the rescue of Israel's diaspora. For Prime Minister Begin's government, the periphery doctrine was a seemingly indispensable enabler of a bold shift in Israeli security policy. From the 1950's until the 1980's, the institution changed primarily through *drift* and *layering*. *Drift* occurred where successive governments inherited the doctrine and applied it within their own vision and context (dealing with a compliant Shah in the 1960's versus a megalomaniacal Shah in the 1970's, for example). *Layering* occurred when new inputs were added to the institution, such as the decision to support the Iraqi Kurds in the 1960's.

Given this institutionalization of the periphery doctrine, it should come as little surprise that it was resistant to the external shock of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Chapter 3 will show that Israel stubbornly clung to its hopes for an alliance with Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq War, even in the face of blistering rhetoric from Khomeini and his supporters, and perhaps most surprisingly, in spite of Iran's sponsorship of attacks against its troops in Lebanon. Regardless of how ossified institutions become, however, they are still being constantly transformed below the surface by the passage of time. By the end of the decade, the periphery doctrine had largely run its course. As Chapter 4 will explain, what remained of this defunct institution reincarnated itself in new form during the 1990's - one that would prove hostile to Iran. From this point forward, Israel would be a key player in the U.S.-Iranian relationship and a spoiler of any kind of rapprochement. Chapter 5 will show how Israel drummed up U.S. and international hostility toward Iran over its nuclear program, yet undermined efforts at

negotiation throughout the 2000's. Chapter 6 will describe how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu desperately sabotaged President Obama's efforts to engage with Iran. In 2015, he lost this fight with the signing of nuclear agreement, but even then, he persisted and helped destroy the deal with the help of President Trump.

U.S. Congress

The final constituency this dissertation will consider is the U.S. Congress. The legislative branch of the U.S. government, including both the Senate and the House of Representatives, is tricky to consider as a unit. U.S. lawmakers, by nature, represent a plurality of interests almost as diverse as the American population itself. Unlike the clerical establishment within Iran, there is no international conflict that constitutes a defining interest or value. Further, the U.S. Congress has traditionally limited its role in foreign policy, ceding this ground largely to the executive branch. Except in certain specific cases where lawmakers have taken a collective interest, usually regarding discrete issues, Congress has exercised its power over foreign relations through control of budgets and its oversight authority to conduct investigative hearings. Why then, should the U.S. Congress be considered as its own constituency? The short answer is that, starting especially in the 1990's, Congress has collectively played an outsized role in undermining potential opportunities for any U.S. president to mend fences with Iran. While rarely unanimous, this effort has often been bipartisan in nature, and it has been remarkably consistent.

In examining the U.S. Congress as a constituency, this dissertation will focus entirely upon its role as a unified actor in the U.S.-Iranian conflict. It will examine trends within Congress only as far as they drove the body in particular directions. This will especially come into play at key points in the

1990's and 2010's when partisan politics became particularly salient in helping to institutionalize the conflict with Iran. An in-depth examination of U.S. politics or Congressional trends is beyond the scope of this work, but Congress is an institution in its own rite. If one were to examine the U.S. legislative branch from an institutional perspective, it is likely that the findings would dovetail nicely with the macro-level trends identified in this work.

The next logical question in considering the U.S. Congress as a constituency regards the influence of Israel. This small state (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, 112-114, 199-203) has developed one of the strongest lobbying apparatuses in U.S. national politics, prominently led by the American Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) influencing both the executive and legislative branches. Why then, should Congress be considered a separate constituency? First, the Israeli lobby is not entirely Israeli. It draws influence (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, 112-114) from a broad cross-section of groups with intersecting interests, especially conservative Christian organizations in the U.S. Second, while Israel has exerted influence, it would be a mistake to think that any lobbying group has control of Congress. Lobbying groups are successful when political conditions are ripe for them to succeed. Often, as explained by economist Mancur Olson (2000, 92-97), this means they are pressing for action on issues about which the voting public is generally unaware or uniformed, leaving lawmakers a free hand to accept money to support the cause. Olson (2000, 93) described typical voters as "rationally ignorant" on most issues. Few Americans have the time or the motivation to study Iran or the dynamics of the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Conversely, lobbyists may succeed when they champion a cause that is already popular or generally accepted with the American people. "Rationally ignorant" voters are still affected by headlines and sensational stories that break through the static of everyday life. As discussed in Appendix A, beginning with the hostage crisis in 1979, the U.S. public has received a steady flow of negative

information regarding Iran. This includes not only events themselves, but the tone in which Iran is discussed. Americans, by-and-large, have not spent much time thinking about Iran, but when they have paid attention, they have been conditioned to view Iranians as irrational extremists bent on destroying the Western way of life. Thus, politicians have been happy to take Israeli money because there has been little to lose and everything to gain by being seen as "tough on Iran." Of course, Congressional leaders have, either intentionally or unintentionally, spurred this demonization process themselves. Regardless, Congress and Israel have usually been linked on the issue of Iran, much in the same fashion that Iran's clerical establishment is linked to the IRGC and security forces. Because constituencies serve as lenses into the process of institutionalization, they need not be neatly separated. If one accounts for relevant linkages, then viewing the problem through lenses of a different tint will only add value to the analysis.

Congress's role in demonizing Iran is also worth considering. Marian Paules' (2003) dissertation from Syracuse University is one of few comprehensive works to examine Congress's role in constructing and maintaining U.S. hostility toward Iran. Paules (2003, 66-69, 77) argued that Congressional hearings are a forum for working the national narrative of America's place in the world. This narrative does not play out in a planned fashion or any particular order, but testimonies by members of Congress and those invited to speak, when taken in aggregate, both reflect and define the American worldview. Her work examined 78 committee hearings between 1987 and 2001, specifically focused on discursive practices. One important observation is that the hearings primarily served two purposes. The first was to hold the President accountable for enforcing Congressionally mandated sanctions when administration officials began to view them as counterproductive and started to ease off. The second was to justify hardline policies and show why the U.S. should not take a more conciliatory approach to Iran. Both served a self-reinforcing role for U.S.-Iranian hostility.

Paules (2003, 92-95, 103-105) also noted that any discussion of Iran, or the Middle East in general, was framed within a triumphalist, post-Cold War, neoliberal narrative that place the U.S. at the center of the free world. Individual lawmakers disagreed at times on what to do about Iran, and some did favor a more cooperative approach, but the common denominator was that Iran was a deviant outlier to the proper world order, and it should be dealt with as such. The U.S, on the other hand, was innocent of wrongdoing with regard to Iran. Congress did not invent neoliberalism, nor did it start the conflict with Iran, but it served as a national echo chamber, amplifying both concepts for the American people. Paules (2003, 107-113) also noted how discursive patterns emerged during the Iran-Contra hearings in 1987 that established the language for almost every hearing that followed. Iran was described as inherently deceitful and antagonistic. By the same token, any attempt to engage with Iran was misguided, foolish, and doomed to fail. In this regard, Congress also became a national repository for historical analogues regarding the conflict. Lawmakers continually reminded each other of Iran's misdeeds and likened current actions to those of the past. Further, attempts at cooperation were automatically compared to the futile effort that ended in the Iran-Contra scandal. A full examination of discursive practices in Congress is beyond the scope of this work, but these patterns of action clearly helped to inoculate U.S. policymakers against hopes of rapprochement with Iran and entrench the conflict over time.

Another key factor that drove Congress as a constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict was partisan infighting. Over the course of four decades, Iran drew a considerable amount of bi-partisan opposition, but this masked the dynamics of the struggle between the parties. Constituencies, by their very nature, gain utility from a conflict that has little to do with the conflict itself. This played out in the partisan realm most clearly during the Presidencies of Democrats Bill Clinton and Barrack Obama. Republicans worked hard to challenge the national security credentials of these presidents, and as a result, they undermined efforts at cooperation and forced those presidents to take a harder line with Iran than they

otherwise might have. Of course, it was not always Republicans using Iran. As Chapter 3 will show, the Iran-Contra Scandal played out in a Senate (U.S. Senate 2020) that had just flipped from Republican to Democrat, and they were eager to reign in the Republican President Ronald Reagan during his second term. Chapter 4 will explain, though, that Congress did not really become a constituent to the conflict until 1994, when Republicans took control of both houses. Chapter 5 will explain how this constituency carried into the presidency of Republican George W. Bush and became entwined in the controversy over Iran's nuclear program. Chapter 6 will then show how Iran played into Republican's vehement opposition of President Obama.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that conflicts become intractable when they become institutionalized. This happens when powerful constituencies develop that view the national interest in their own parochial terms and have a key stake in the perpetuation of the conflict. Over time, this commitment to the continuation of the conflict becomes ingrained – an institution of animosity — so that changing events and circumstances have little or no impact on the desire of these constituencies to ensure that the conflict does not end. By understanding the dynamics of institutions in general, one can gain insights into when and how conflicts become intractable, along with potential off-ramps through which this condition might be reversed. The tenets of Historical Institutionalism offer a model that can be applied to the study of conflict, highlighting recognizable processes that can be used to identify and trace the development of institutional animosity. This dissertation will apply this model to the U.S.-Iranian relationship between 1979 and 1989.

This chapter has introduced five constituencies that developed in the course of this conflict. The next four chapters will tell the institutional story of four decades of animosity using these constituencies as the main actors. This story will demonstrate that the power of the constituencies to keep the conflict going is so strong that even when the leaders of the US and Iran sought to tamp down hostilities, they proved unable to do so. As much as anyone else, they became prisoners to the institutionalization of the conflict."

CHAPTER 3 - THE FIRST DECADE, 1979-1989

The first decade of the Islamic Republic, which coalesced under the rule (or "guidance") of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, laid the foundation for three decades of institutionalized conflict between the U.S. and Iran. While the two sides entered open confrontation by the end of the first year, institutionalization is never an instant process. As this chapter will show, even after multiple clashes on various levels, both sides continued to hold out hope for improved relations for much of the decade. In a path-dependent fashion, each event made positive developments less likely, but they never became impossible. Only when taken together over the course of time did these events combine to generate a type of gravity capable of transcending national interest that would carry into future decades. This dissertation will cover four decades of the conflict, but this first decade was markedly different from the ones to follow. Whereas succeeding chapters will tell the story of how constituencies to the conflict shaped events in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, this first decade is the story of how events produced and shaped those constituencies in the first place. Many of the key actors in the drama of the 1980's U.S.-Iranian relationship were important players in nascent or developing constituencies, but the institutional processes that bound them as such were still in development, so treating them in a unified fashion would be premature.

This chapter will begin with a short examination of the historical roots that allowed enmity for the U.S. to spring forth with such surprising speed during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This is a story of tectonic plates moving slowly into position, unnoticed for many years by the U.S. The chapter will then cover key episodes within the U.S.-Iranian relationship over the course of the decade, highlighting institutional processes as they occur. The first will be the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in 1979, leading to the hostage crisis. Next it will look at the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, running concurrently with most of the other events in the chapter. These included the U.S. mission in Lebanon,

during which Iranian proxies bombed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Lebanon also produced a hostage crisis of its own, and this led to the arms-for-hostages negotiations that became the Iran-Contra Affair. In 1987 and 1988, U.S. and Iranian forces clashed directly and openly for the first (and arguably the last) time on the waters of the Persian Gulf in the "Tanker War." Khomeini's death at the end of the decade was another key inflection point with lasting consequences. This chapter will then take stock of each of the five constituencies at the end of the decade, in light of the preceding events.

Historical Roots of Iranian Resentment

The primary root of Iranian hostility against the U.S. stemmed from one specific event, operation TP AJAX, in which the U.S. sponsored a coup against the elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953 which returned Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to his throne. This is curious in some ways because before this event, U.S. forces physically occupied a portion of Iran (splitting the country with the British and Soviets) during World War II, using the country as a transshipment point for war materiel to the Soviet Union. Further, the Allied Forces were directly responsible for deposing and exiling the Shah's father, Reza Pahlavi, when he unwisely declared support for Nazi Germany. After the war, the U.S. withdrew completely and openly pressured the Soviets to relinquish their position in Iran, one of a succession of moves throughout the decade which ingratiated America to the new Shah (Bill 1988, 18-37). Regardless, the World War II occupation is rarely mentioned as a source of grievance for Iran. The Mossadegh coup, on the other hand, is rarely forgotten.

Mohammad Mossadegh (Amanat 2017, 519-555), a charismatic but eccentric nationalist politician, rose to the forefront of Iranian politics in 1950, becoming Prime Minister in 1951. Mossadegh's original platform was relatively straightforward. He advocated the complete

nationalization of Iran's oil industry, a position which put Iran in bitter conflict with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and the British government. While Mossadegh was popular with the Iranian people, his stubbornness and zeal eventually alienated him from virtually all of Iran's domestic power brokers. By the end of 1952, he amassed unprecedented powers to rule by decree and began purging his political opponents, including supporters of the royal family in the judiciary, military, and bureaucracy. This culminated in a 1953 referendum which overrode the Iranian constitution and directly usurped the powers of the young Shah. Meanwhile, the British were in no mood to compromise with Mossadegh, especially not on his terms. British imperialist claims received little attention from the Truman administration, but they found Dwight Eisenhower's cabinet far more amenable to intervention. Key American policymakers, including Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Allen Dulles, viewed the Middle East strictly in terms of the emerging Cold War. Concerned that Mossadegh's recklessness would pave the way for Soviet opportunism, the CIA executed TP AJAX in August 1953, in coordination with the Shah, himself. Its first push was a dismal failure, but after several tense days and some limited bloodshed, Mossadegh was imprisoned and the Shah firmly reestablished on his throne.

The American-led coup against Mossadegh became, quite literally, the stuff of legends. Stephen Kinzer (2003, 209-215) provided a gripping historical narrative of the political intrigue and cloak-and-dagger exploits which returned the Shah to power. While the U.S. did not openly acknowledge its role in the coup for 47 years, its involvement became quickly apparent to interested observers, especially in Iran. Moreover, the success of the operation emboldened the U.S. foreign policy community to adopt foreign regime change as viable tool of statecraft during the Cold War. Kenneth Pollack (2004, 67-71) pointed out that the tragedy of TP AJAX was that, even for the purposes of the day, U.S. involvement was likely unnecessary. The conditions that led to Mossadegh's downfall were already in place, so all the CIA really did was "strike the match." In fact, although Iran’s clerical establishment would eventually

take the lead in condemning the U.S. for the coup, clergy members disaffected by Mossadegh's rule took CIA money and played an integral role in restoring the Shah. Unfortunately, because the U.S. implicated itself in the event, it spawned two lines of mythology on the Iranian side. First, Iranians idealized Mossadegh's problematic leadership and blamed the U.S. for inhibiting the development of democracy in Iran. Second, they began to envision the CIA as an all-powerful boogey man, pulling the strings behind every unfortunate turn of events.

In its relationship with the Shah, the U.S. started a chain of events that would culminate in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This is not to say that the U.S. caused the revolution, or that any number of possibilities might not have altered the course of history along the way, but the U.S. and the Shah tied their fortunes together in 1953. As is often the case, the perception this created was more important than the reality. Iranians began to view the Shah as a U.S. puppet, and they associated the U.S. with all the failures and shortcomings of the Shah's modernization policies, regardless of the degree to which either picture was accurate. Increasing oil revenues in the 1960's and 1970's exacerbated this effect. As pointed out by Najmabadi (1987), oil wealth gave the Shah a degree of independence that allowed him to isolate himself from Iran's traditional bases of power: the clergy, landowners, and merchants. This made his state brittle, and when crises hit in the late 1970's, his only ally was a United States government that was decreasingly able or willing to intervene again on his behalf. In spite of this reluctance, when the revolution brought ordinary Iranians to the streets, the U.S. became a de facto symbol of everything that the people were protesting against.

In institutional terms, this sequence of events demonstrated *displacement and conversion*, the process through which social groups collectively transition their perception and focus. Mossadegh's own rise to power owed almost entirely to popular resentment against the British, which though they never colonized Iran, treated the country as though they had. For all his faults, Mossadegh's stand

against AIOC regarding Iranian sovereignty over its oil resources was almost unanimously viewed as a struggle against injustice and oppression by the Iranian people. The overthrow of Mossadegh sparked a new round of *displacement and conversion* whereby the sins of the British were largely forgotten in light of a new animosity toward America. In true institutional fashion, the shift took years to complete, but it both reinforced and was reinforced by the popular perception of the Shah as a symbol of foreign domination.

Finally, this new animosity was reinforced by *layering,* the institutional process by which new developments and previously unrelated issues become intrinsically linked to a specific grievance or problem set. The Shah led Iran (Harris 2017, 46-79) on a difficult journey toward social and economic modernization, based upon the Western model epitomized by the U.S. model. Rapid change created winners, but it left many Iranians insecure and discontent. Additionally, increases in communications technology began connecting many Iranians with outside world for the first time in history, again challenging cultural norms. Jalal Al-e Ahmad's book, *Gharbzadehgi [Westoxification]* (Amanat 2017, 690) popularly expressed the anxieties felt by Iranians as their culture and society faced new influences emanating from the West. None of these issues were inherently sufficient to turn the Iranian people specifically against the U.S. by themselves, but when *layered* upon the belief that America had replaced Great Britain as the regional puppet master, they became especially potent.

A Decade of Animosity

The fall of the Shah in early 1979 completely reset the U.S. relationship with Iran, but this event by no means preordained four decades of hostility. Neither side apparently envisioned a permanent rift, but in the short-term, stoking animosity proved expedient for both sides. The conflict between the U.S.

and Iran was constructed by institutional processes. *Displacement and conversion* worked over the course of the decade to transfer attention in both camps from other issues and conflicts to toward a mutual focus on each other. *Layering* took key issues and events that may or may not have been directly related to the conflict and transformed them into enduring facets of the relationship, relics of the past endowed with the power to shape future events. Each historical juncture presented a new set of possibilities that included improving the relationship, but both sides entered these junctures with baggage from the past which influenced the outcome. The events of the 1980's set the stage for a protracted conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

U.S. Embassy hostage crisis

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 toppled the Shah, the U.S. government (Bill 1988, 278-281, 284, 291-292) (Sick 1986, 219-222) attempted to rebuild its ties with the Iran and make inroads with the new government, focusing diplomatic efforts almost entirely on the secular nationalist faction, which advocated republican democracy. The U.S. embassy sustained several attacks during the revolution, the most serious of which (FBIS 1979a) (FBIS 1979b) occurred on February 14, 1979, when a Marxist faction assaulted the compound and took 70 U.S. personnel hostage. This incident only lasted a matter of hours, and Ayatollah Khomeini personally intervened to resolve the crisis. Meanwhile Khomeini's supporters struggled against the secular nationalists to implement their vision of an Islamic government in Iran. Leftist factions (Tabaar 2017), with their own vision for Iran's future, threw in their lot with Khomeini against the democratic camp, but with armed militias and broad support, they proved the greatest threat to Khomeini's long-term position. In October 1979, President Carter (Sick 1986, 215) made a controversial decision to allow the former Shah to come to the United States for cancer

treatment. The situation in Iran was already volatile, and on November 4, 1979, a student group that supported Khomeini besieged the embassy. Apparently, Khomeini was not involved in this decision (Bowden 2006, 12-14)(Milani 1994, 165-166), and a member of his circle had quietly advised the students that it would be better for them act without permission than involve the Ayatollah ahead of time - a likely attempt by radicals to force Khomeini's hand. What initially appeared to be a peaceful sit-in (Bowden 2006, 15, 55-58) escalated into a full-scale seizure of the U.S. Embassy, and the students took the occupants captive (including several from a different location). After a number were initially released, the attackers held a total of 52 American citizens for the entire duration of 444 days.

Khomeini reacted to the situation in a stepwise manner. His statement (Library of Congress CRS 1981, 34-35) following the U.S. acceptance of the Shah was relatively constrained, but a week later, by November 1, he called for his student supporters to "expand their attacks against the U.S. and Israel." Per Axworthy (2013, 168-169), when the students seized the embassy on November 4, Khomeini waited to gauge both public opinion and the U.S. reaction. Sensing an opening, Khomeini (FBIS 1979b1) expressed his support for the students the next day, dubbing the embassy a "lair of espionage and plotting" which the U.S. intended to use as a base for returning the Shah to power. As many expected (Milani 1994, 166, 173), the secular nationalist Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan strongly opposed the embassy takeover and ran afoul of Khomeini, who effectively forced him to resign in frustration. Bazargan's fall signaled the beginning of the end for secular moderate influence in the Iranian government.

The Carter administration (Houghton 2001, 76, 101, 106-109), lacking a paradigm for the crisis that was unfolding, reverted to a playbook based on previous historical events, which suggested that calmness and the firm but gradual application of pressure would bring the Iranian government to its senses. Khomeini, on the other hand, smelled weakness, and his open defiance of the U.S. was proving

popular with the public and useful for sidelining his adversaries. The crisis (Axworthy 2013, 170-171) became a platform to silence his critics and pave the way for the enshrinement of *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of jurisprudence, making a religious leader the supreme leader and guide for Iran) in the new constitution, which was adopted the next month. According to Tabaar (2017), not only was the hostage crisis a vehicle for victory over secular opponents, but it also allowed Khomeini to seize the initiative from his leftist competition. The leftists had curried a great deal of public support in Iran by touting radical Marxist slogans against the U.S. and the West. In one blow, Khomeini stole their thunder and become the leading symbol of Iranian resistance against Western imperialism.

For the next year, the Carter administration struggled (Sick 1986, 266, 282-284) in vain to resolve the crisis, exhausting its predictable inventory of sanctions, threats and diplomatic overtures, while Khomeini remained aloof and intransigent. In Iran, this drama played out against the backdrop of a domestic struggle for control of the government which the U.S. was not capable of penetrating or influencing. In early 1980, Abolhassan Bani Sadr (Amanat 2017, 793-798), was elected Iran's first President. Bani Sadr was a supporter of Khomeini, and for a time enjoyed his blessing, but he also had liberal leanings and was intent on building a viable, functioning government. As Bani-Sadr attempted to assert presidential authority, he immediately butted heads with Khomeini's clerical supporters (represented by the Islamic Republican Party (IRP)), who preferred to treat political power as the spoils of the revolution. While Khomeini supported him occasionally (more often not), Bani-Sadr steadily lost ground to his rivals, eventually casting about for support from nationalists and leftists. Bani-Sadr openly advocated the return of the hostages, but his adversaries used this to undermine the presidency. Khomeini established a predictable pattern (Sick 1986, 281-321) of suggesting support for his president, then pulling the rug afterward with fiery speeches denouncing compromise.

In April 1980, Carter lost patience with diplomatic efforts and authorized a military operation to rescue the hostages. Unfortunately, Operation Eagle Claw distinguished itself as one of the most prominent disasters in U.S. military history. The complex, multi-stage effort (Kreisher 2000) was fraught from the outset, and the commander aborted the mission en route because of technical problems. At the refueling site for the return journey, in an isolated section of Iranian desert, two U.S. aircraft collided. The ensuing explosion killed eight Americans and severely burned four more. Forced to leave bodies and wreckage in Iran, the operation was a propaganda coup for the Iranian government. Iranian leaders irreverently held press conferences with bodies in the background, and Khomeini (FBIS 1980a & 1980c) delivered vitriolic speeches claiming that God had intervened on behalf of Iran. Amanat (2017, 828) claimed that this projected an aura of invincibility on Khomeini, and the incident seemed to prove Khomeini's point that the U.S. could not "do a damn thing."

On the U.S. side, though planning continued for a second try, the failure Eagle Claw effectively foreclosed on the option to solve the crisis with military force. Eagle Claw also drew widespread international criticism (Ryan 1985, 97-100), even from European allies, and a military commission led by Admiral James Holloway III (Special Operations Review Group 1980) to in investigate the operation exposed a litany of systemic problems that not only led to the failure of Eagle Claw but continued to plague the military more widely. Some of the committee's recommendations would eventually drive major institutional changes within the U.S. military, as this chapter will discuss further. In the meantime, the failure cost Carter politically in an election year.

Iran's first positive overtures for a negotiated solution corresponded closely with Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, but Axworthy (2013, 180-183, 202-204) argued that it was not the Iraqi threat that brought Iran to the table. In the Spring and Summer of 1980, Khomeini's IRP supporters sidelined leftist politicians almost completely from parliament, secured the position of Prime Minister,

and foisted of their members upon Bani Sadr as cabinet officials. At this point, clerical control of the government was almost entirely complete, and the hostages had outlived their usefulness. In spite of an enthusiastic opening, likely engineered to some degree by future president Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Carter's complete cooperation, negotiations languished for months. According to Pollack (2004, 171) it was apparent in hindsight that Iranian leaders attempted to game the U.S. presidential election, in which Ronald Reagan defeated Carter, and Iranian leaders gloated (FBIS 1981c) (FBIS 1981d) about their role in Carter's downfall, delaying the release of the hostages until immediately after Reagan's inauguration as a parting jab.

Reagan's election also gave Iran a new deadline (Sick 1986, 376-377, 395-402), as they gained no further advantage from dealing with this new president. However, their own side was hamstrung by factional infighting and they frittered away their bargaining position in the waning days of the Carter administration, unable to accept a series of relatively generous offers. The final settlement of $4 billion cash was one third of its original claim against Iranian assets held by the U.S., and it did not include any of the military equipment purchased by the Shah, although Carter had offered this three months before. Sick (1991, 189-191) estimated the dollar cost of the hostages to Iran as roughly $8 billion in lost assets, amounting to $150 million per hostage, or $300,000 per day per hostage. Predictably, Iranian leaders claimed victory (FBIS 1981a, b, d). Bani Sadr (Milani 1994, 182-183) (Axworthy 2013, 205) used the negotiations debacle as ammunition against his IRP rivals, scoring a short-term win but sealing his own eventual downfall. After the crisis (Bowden 2007, 593), Iran converted the embassy chancery into permanent anti-American museum in Tehran.

This foundational moment of the U.S.-Iranian conflict was rife with institutional processes. Perhaps the most prominent example was Khomeini's decision to endorse the embassy takeover. In spite of his anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric, Khomeini's original movement had one defining

goal, the overthrow of the Shah. When the Shah fell sooner than most expected, it opened the space for competing visions regarding the future of Iran, and Khomeini's prominence was no longer assured. Blustery rhetoric aside, Khomeini had taken little action against the U.S. or its interests that would endanger the possibility of a future relationship, but in the heat of a domestic power struggle, defining himself in opposition to the U.S. became a political expedient. Takeyh (2012, 55) argued that "Khomeini's internationalism needed to have an antagonist, a foil against which to define itself." In essence, the process of *displacement and conversion* replaced the Shah with the U.S. as Khomeini's (ergot Iran's) primary adversary.

The prolongation of the crisis also demonstrated how the domestics politics *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship began to form, where an issue that had nothing to do with the U.S. had a notable effect on the direction of the international conflict. One might argue that the chief lesson Iranian leaders took from this process is that radicalism sells. They established radicalism as a baseline which would provide the safest path forward in domestic competition and to which they could always retreat under pressure. Of course, the object of radical discourse would now be the U.S. In addition, the ensuing hostage crisis added at two more notable *layers* on the Iranian side that would complicate its relationship with the U.S.

First, the episode entrenched a predilection for bold and decisive action within the organizational culture of the Islamic Republic. Just as the students who stormed the embassy preferred to beg forgiveness than permission, the newly empowered elites of all ranks would find that initiative was rewarded more often than punished, providing an incentive for radical action. In the years to come, it would be difficult for Western observers to tell when a provocative action by Iran derived from central planning or the initiative of subordinates, and it also appears in hindsight that Iranian leaders had less control over their officials than commonly believed. Second, Iranians learned that the U.S. had no good

answer for the problem of hostage taking. Hostages were easy to take and valuable commodities. This would be especially problematic for the relationship with the creation of Hezbollah later in the decade, and it would continue for decades as Iran would sporadically detain dual national citizens on the flimsiest of charges and hold them for political purposes. Davar (2019) argued forty years later that Iran was still "addicted to hostage-taking" as a foreign policy tool.

For the U.S., the hostage crisis began processes of *displacement and conversion* as well, transforming Iran from a friend to an adversary, but the objects of transference (Iraq and the Soviet Union) would only become clear as the decade unfolded. More important to the hostage crisis itself, the U.S. formed the basis of new *layers* for the developing conflict. First, the U.S. began to apply sanctions to Iran, and it froze Iranian assets. This started as a tactical move in reaction to hostility, and a single act would not be considered an institutional process. However, the U.S. would maintain varying degrees of sanctions (and sponsor international sanctions, as well) for the entire 40-year period under examination. Sanctions became a *layer* of the conflict because they established habitual patterns of action on both sides of the conflict, shaping the economy and inspiring resistance in Iran, while becoming a symbol of assertiveness on the U.S. side. The sanctions themselves *layered* upon each other over the years, complicating opportunities for diplomacy, even when the original impetus for specific sanctions had become muddled by history. Additionally, Iran's frozen assets, especially those previously controlled by the former Shah, became a mythical beast, with the disposition and amount disputed for decades by the two sides. The Carter administration (Sick 1986, 282-284) also experimented with extra-territorial sanctions, freezing Iranian assets held by U.S. banks in foreign countries, betting that litigation in foreign courts would tie the assets up indefinitely. This innovation foreshadowed the move three decades later when the U.S. enforced secondary sanctions on Iran by threatening removal of foreign financial institutions from the SWIFT banking system.

The second *layer* on the U.S. side was the assumption that Iran could not be negotiated with. The U.S. cut diplomatic ties and lost the means to dialogue with Iran. This was a temporary, tactical move spawned by hostage crisis, but it had generational effects. The U.S. would not have diplomatic representation in Iran again for any of the 40 years under study. The third *layer* on the U.S. side was that Iran became associated with the politics of blame. The Shah's political allies in the U.S., especially Henry Kissinger (1979), lambasted the Carter administration over its foreign policy by framing the fall of the Shah with debate over "who lost Iran?" The incessant media coverage of the hostage crisis perpetuated this debate, leaving the Carter administration vulnerable to a tremendous amount of criticism. Reagan clearly learned from Carter's misfortunes, and Iran would be a political hot potato on the U.S. side since that point. Animosity would always be safer than engagement.

Lastly, the U.S. media coverage added additional *layers* to the conflict with Iran, including a set of narratives that would come to largely define the relationship. This is a complex and multi-faceted topic, beyond the scope of this work, and an expanded discussion is included in Appendix A. However, the hostage crisis occurred at a juncture in the history of the news media when the technology and platforms were becoming available to deliver an unprecedented amount of televised news to audiences, both in the U.S. and around the world. The crisis generated daily coverage and spawned the ABC News program *Nightline*, which endures to this day. This style of coverage, with soap-opera-like narratives, eventually paved the way for the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle a decade later. This news coverage tied a broad cross-section of the American public intimately to the human drama of the hostage crisis. It also exposed them to the prevailing narratives of Western commentators, which Said (1997, 81-123) described as having overtly imperialistic overtones.

Media commentators reduced the political and cultural dynamics occurring in Iran to simple tropes, such as the "mad mullah" narrative which viewed Iranians as wild-eyed extremists, impervious to

reason and bent on destroying Western civilization. These narratives would continue to build and proliferate throughout the duration of the conflict, shaping the American worldview with regard to Iran and influencing policymakers, in particular. On the Iranian side Rubin (1980, 340-341, 356-364), leaders scoured Western media coverage for reflections of their own impact on the world. Hyperbole and sensationalism in the American press had the indirect effect of fueling tensions with Iran as its leaders developed and exaggerated sense of their own centrality to American life and also homed in on perceived offenses and slights.

As this section has shown, the hostage crisis sowed a number of the seeds that would eventually lead to the institutionalization of conflict between the U.S. and Iran. For the U.S., it was a traumatic event that turned Iran decisively from friend to foe and began a number of processes that would solidify this position in coming years. Chief among these was the generation of new narratives that redefined Iran in U.S. eyes. For Iranians, the experience provided a mixture of catharsis and empowerment. The rupture with the U.S. was never meant to be permanent, but it was so politically expedient for Iran's new rulers that it entrenched new patterns of action with hostility as a default position. Radicalism became the coin of the realm, and the benefits of goading the U.S. usually outweighed the costs for ambitious leaders. The Iranian people quietly paid the price.

Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War, which began in September 1980, suffered no shortage of historical roots (Murray and Woods 2014, 9-15), but neither was it a foregone conclusion. In 1975, the Shah had stripped Iraq of its claim to the Shatt al-Arab region linking Iraq's rivers to the Persian Gulf, along with the oil rich province of Khuzestan, but in return, he withdrew his support for Iraq's restive Kurds in the

north. When the Islamic Revolution toppled the Shah in 1979, Saddam Hussein (Karsh 1990, 265-267), the de facto ruler and soon-to-be president of Iraq, initially welcomed the change and sent peaceful overtures to Iran's new rulers. However, Ayatollah Khomeini, whose years in exile in Iraq had cemented his relationship with the country's oppressed Shiite majority, denounced the Baathist regime and began actively supporting dissident Shiite groups in Iraq. This led to an escalatory chain of events (Crist 2012, 86) as militias attacked government officials and Saddam Hussein (Aziz 1993, 207) cracked down on Iraqi Shiites, eventually executing Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a prominent clerical leader who shared Khomeini's revolutionary views and belief in *valayat-e faqih*. By the Spring of 1980 (Karsh 1990, 265-267), both sides were actively shelling each at points along their common border, and in June, Iran's leaders openly called for a Shiite uprising to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Iran called up its military reserves (Pollack 2004, 186-188) two days prior to Iraq's invasion, and the only real surprise to Iran was the intensity and scope of the Iraqi onslaught.

Iraq attacked Iran with a force of 45,000 troops along multiple axes (Axworthy 2013, 189-202, 207-209) (Pollack 2004, 186-188), catching Iran woefully unprepared. Iran's clerical leaders had decimated the Shah's military through revolutionary purges, and their forces relied on U.S. technology, to which they no longer had access. Iran's superior air force scored some initial successes, but with limited maintenance capacity, they could not afford to decisively commit these assets. Yet even in its sorry state, Iran's military gave the Iraqis more resistance than they expected. Apparently hoping to lock in some quick gains, Saddam Hussein accepted a U.S.-sponsored ceasefire resolution a week after the invasion, but Iran was not prepared to accept defeat. Revolutionary zeal and nationalistic fervor (Ward 2009 244-256) swelled the ranks of Iran's ground forces even beyond their ability to effectively absorb the troops, and they fought the Iraqis to a standstill, stalemating the conflict for the next year. In September 1981, Iran began an offensive campaign which gradually pushed the Iraq forces back to the pre-war border. This also marked Iran's first use of human wave tactics, where large numbers of highly

motivated troops would overwhelm defensive positions, usually with a high loss of life. Volunteers from the *Basij* auxiliary, some of whom were young teenagers, bore the brunt of this sacrifice. This produced some of the stories of Iranian fanaticism that gripped and appalled Western observers, adding to the narrative *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict. Another defining feature of the Iran-Iraq War which emerged from its earliest days was competition between Iran's regular army (*Artesh*) and the newly formed IRGC (*Sepah*). Both fought valiantly and earned the respect of the Iranian people, but the rift would hamper Iran's war efforts throughout the conflict.

In June of 1982 (Axworthy 2013, 226-232) Saddam Hussein withdrew all forces from Iran and sued for peace. Iran rejected the offer. On the surface, it appeared that this was a vindictive move by an intransigent Khomeini, however historical research has revealed this to have been the product of factional politics. IRGC commanders and at least some of Khomeini's supporters (the question of whom remains in debate) strongly pushed for an offensive to try and topple Saddam's regime. Further (Takeyh 2009b, 93-94), many of Iran's clerical leaders distrusted Saddam so thoroughly that they were convinced he would attack again at first opportunity. Khomeini acquiesced and fostered rhetorical chants of "war until victory!" Like Saddam Hussein at the beginning of the war, Iran's hawks severely underappreciated the difficulty of fighting on their neighbor's soil and overestimated their own offensive abilities. Their initial advances (Ward 2009, 256-261) into Iraqi territory were costly failures leading to a state of trench warfare not seen since World War I. The Iraqis fought more effectively when defending their homeland, and even the Shia chose solidarity with their countrymen over sympathy for foreign invaders. Nevertheless, decisive victories appeared to be waiting just around every corner, and Iran launched numerous offensives over the course of eight years, slipping into a pattern of one major operation per year with several iteratively named subordinate efforts. Iran achieved some successes (Murray and Woods 2014, 263-275, 286-288), including the capture of the Fao Peninsula in 1986 which nearly cut

Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf, but these gains always proved fleeting. By the summer of 1988, Iraq had retaken all of its original territory.

The ground combat between Iran and Iraq played on both sides as a drama of human courage, sacrifice, and brutality, but other aspects of the war would also prove important. First, the two sides fought a "war of the cities" between 1984 and 1988 (Murray and Woods 2014, 257, 275-276) in which Bagdad and Tehran (along with other major population centers) became the targets of intense air attacks. Starting primarily with aircraft, but shifting to cheaper and less accurate ballistic missile attacks, both sides indiscriminately killed thousands of each other's civilian populations. Iran suffered the heavier cost, and this vulnerability spurred the IRGC's ballistic missile program, which would become a contentious *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict for decades afterward. Second, the Persian Gulf (Ward 2009, 170-173) became a battleground as the two foes targeted shipping, which eventually drew the U.S. into the "tanker war" which will be discussed later in the chapter. Finally, Saddam Hussein (Director of Central Intelligence 1988, 1-6) began using chemical weapons, especially mustard gas in 1983. While Iraq always denied these attacks (sometimes thinly), they became frequent occurrences and were clearly integral to Iraqi battle plans. It should also be noted that, even though the Iranians were often accused of using chemical weapons themselves, little evidence ever emerged to corroborate these accusations. A U.S. intelligence report from 1988 (Director of Central Intelligence 1988, 1) stated that Iran only used chemical weapons "on a very limited scale beginning in 1985, probably for testing and training." It also conducted several small-scale mustard gas attacks at the end of the war.

While the hostage crisis demonstrated *displacement and conversion* on the Iranian side, the Iran-Iraq War did so just as prominently for the U.S. In 1980, Iraq was a Cold War adversary and Iran only recently a close ally. By the middle of the decade, Iran became the enemy, and while relations with Iraq never reached the level of an alliance, Reagan's "tilt" toward Iraq drew the U.S. into de facto

partnership with Saddam Hussein. Carter's initial reaction to Iraq's invasion was shaped entirely by the Cold War (Eaton 1980) (El Azhary, 1984, 96-98), even though the hostage crisis was still ongoing. The Soviets had only recently invaded Afghanistan, and the Carter administration worried that the conflict might give them a foothold in either Iraq or Iran, so the U.S. declared neutrality and advocated a strict return to status quo borders, rallying the international community to condemn the conflict.

When Reagan entered office (Gibson 2010, 55-64), his Cold War focus was just as sharp, but his staff initially toyed with the idea of arming Iran through third parties, showing that the conflict was not yet institutionalized. Since supporting Iran looked too problematic, the U.S. and Iraq began to quietly court each other, even while Reagan openly promoted neutrality. Rapprochement with Iraq (Crist 2012, 96-97, 104) (Pollack 2004, 206-208) had strong critics as well, both in the foreign policy establishment and the U.S. Congress, but what tipped the scales was Iran's decision to invade Iraqi territory in 1982. The U.S. intelligence community (Gibson 2010, 73-79, 83-84) began to question Iraq's internal stability and contemplate the implications of a decisive Iranian victory. None of the scenarios were promising for U.S. policy, and regional partners including Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States all campaigned vociferously for greater U.S. support. Takeyh (2009, 99) quoted Secretary of State George Shultz as saying that, "Our support for Iraq increased in rough proportion to Iran's success."

Between 1982 and 1988, the U.S. gradually but deliberately implemented an unstated policy of contravening its declared neutrality in favor of Iraq. The U.S. government (Pollack 2004, 207-208) (Crist 2012, 98) removed Iraq from the official list of state sponsors of terrorism. Reagan could not provide war material directly, but the U.S. offered credits and loans that freed Iraqi resources to purchase arms from other sources, and U.S. diplomats (Crist 2012, 100-101) (Gibson 2010, 79, 88, 104-120, 145) skirted the neutrality and embargo rules by actively facilitating weapons deals for Iraq with America's allies and partners. The administration also allowed the sale of dual use helicopters and trucks to Iran, even

drawing admonishment from Congress. In 1984, the U.S. (Crist 2012, 104-105) (Gibson 2010, 209, 213-214) restored full diplomatic relations with Iraq, and this helped to facilitate an extensive intelligence sharing program that aided Iraq against Iran until the very end of the war, an open secret only thinly veiled in official statements.

The other side of this *displacement and conversion* was that the U.S. began to actively oppose Iran. The same U.S. diplomats (Crist 2012, 101-103) that facilitated weapons transfers for Iraq worked just as diligently to build support for enforcement of the weapons embargo against Iran. The U.S. launched Operation Staunch (Gibson 2010, 112-113, 125-126) - a coordinated diplomatic and military effort to close off the transfer of weapons to Iran, which forced Iran to turn to a network of shady and high-priced gray arms merchants for its supplies. Perhaps most tellingly (Associated Press 1984), in January of 1984, the U.S. State Department officially designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism (connected largely to Iranian sponsored attacks in both Lebanon and Kuwait during the preceding months). The same year the U.S. resumed full diplomatic relations with its former adversary, Iraq, its former ally, Iran, now took its place as a pariah state.

Some of these U.S. actions during the Iran-Iraq War added enduring *layers* to the conflict with Iran, but the most prominent *layers* from this period emerged in the context of U.S. inaction. The U.S. intelligence community (Gibson 2010, 104-120, 127-138) was fully aware of Iraq's "almost daily" use of chemical weapons beginning in 1983. Iran's complaints to the U.N. produced token action on the U.S. side, but America never fundamentally altered its support for Iraq or forced its hand over this issue. Further, the U.N. Security Council (influenced by the U.S.) took little action, producing "statements" instead of resolutions, which invariably admonished both sides of the conflict on almost equal terms. A full examination of this controversial failure is beyond the scope of this work, but it does provide two key insights useful in understanding the institutionalization of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

First, Americans viewed Iran's suicidal human wave tactics and the use of children in combat (along with the innovation of suicide bombing within the terrorist arsenal) with a mix of horror and fixation. Chemical weapons may have been repulsive, but compared with fanaticism, it did not seem so bad. One sentence from a presidential directive in 1984 (The White House 1984a, 3) is particularly revealing: "Our condemnation of the use of CW munitions by the belligerents should place equal stress on the urgent need to dissuade Iran from continuing the ruthless and inhumane tactics which have characterized recent offensives." Therefore, even in the most strongly worded U.S. or international condemnation of chemical weapons use, Iran would always somehow continue to emerge as the villain.

Second, the U.S. was developing a narrative (*layer*) with regard to Iran that superseded factual analysis. The U.S. (Gibson 2010, 149) began to accuse Iran in 1985 of developing its own chemical weapons program. While this was true to a very limited degree (Director of Central Intelligence 1988, 1-6), Iran conducted no chemical attacks until the end of the war, and even then, none of significance. The rumor-mill in Washington policy circles, however, took on a life of its own. Richard Murphy, a senior State Department official during this period (Blight, et al. 2012, 107-109), state that "the rumor was all over Washington, that Iran used CW on the southern front." Murphy explained how these beliefs made it easy for policymakers to stop worrying about human rights. In spite of the bad things Iraqis were doing, Iranians were seen as "crazy zealots." In short, Iranians had been dehumanized, and facts were no longer as important as collective beliefs. The concepts of narrative creation and dehumanization will be central to understanding the institutionalization of conflict over the course of four decades.

One additional *layer* that emerged from the conflict on the U.S. side was the development of a U.S.-sponsored regional security architecture within the greater Middle East region. While Carter advocated strict neutrality between Iraq and Iran at the beginning of their war, he also deftly leveraged

the conflict (El Azhary, 1984, 89-91) (Gibson 2010, 51-52) and the growing fears of both Iran and the Soviet Union to pull regional actors, including the Gulf Arab States and Pakistan, into the U.S. orbit. As later sections and chapters will show, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) would become the lynchpin for this architecture in future years. The important implication, however, was that this architecture both excluded and aligned naturally against Iran, making it increasingly hard for the U.S. to restore relations with Iran without upsetting its own arrangement. This became an extension of the diplomatic isolation of Iran that started during the hostage crisis.

The Iranian side added a number of key *layers* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict during this period as well. The first *layer* was the war itself. Much of the literature on the Iran-Iraq War focuses primarily on Saddam Hussein's decision to start the war, largely forgetting Khomeini's role in instigating the conflict. Why would Khomeini and supporters push for war with a neighboring state during such a precarious moment of national transition? If Khomeini's decision to alienate the U.S. was a product of domestic political calculations, the same logic likely held with regard to Iraq. Khomeini's supporters had pushed their rivals out of formal government, but the leftists, especially the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), remained a potent force. In 1981 (O'hern 2012, 32-33), they fought an armed insurgency against Khomeini, only to be defeated. As the coming years would show, the Islamic Republic thrived on maintaining a continual state of emergency which allowed Khomeini to crush his rivals. This was probably a factor (Takeyh 2012, 54) in the decision to continue the war in 1982, as well. For all the reasons discussed so far in this section, the Iran-Iraq war did not stay a family matter between two brothers. The U.S. was sucked in, as well.

This inevitable involvement led to a second *layer* of the conflict, a crusade against Western imperialism. Iran considered the U.S. to be an integral part of the adversary it faced in the Iran-Iraq War. From the beginning, Iranian media (FBIS 1981e) and the public speeches of its leaders painted

Iraq's invasion as having been, if not engineered by the U.S., certainly encouraged by it. Khomeini termed the struggle against the Iraqi invasion as Iran's "Sacred Defense," but by tying the U.S. to all Iran's external enemies, the "Sacred Defense" could be situated in a larger holy war against the West. This became especially important in 1982, when Iran switched from defense to offense. Regardless of the rationale for this decision, Khomeini (Takeyh 2012, 54) clearly seized the opportunity to continue consolidating his position. He termed the offensive Iran's "third revolution," claiming it would cleanse the country of all secular influences. Takeyh (2012, 53-54) observed that Khomeini could never have rallied the Iranian people to conduct a limited war with limited objectives. This offensive had to be a crusade against a universal adversary larger than Saddam Hussein. The U.S. tilt toward Iraq could hardly have played better into Khomeini's narrative.

A third *layer* on the Iranian side was a heightened sense of injustice, which expanded on narratives regarding the Mossadegh coup and a uniquely Shiite sense of oppression. This started when the international community (Axworthy 2013, 195-202, 207-209) pressured Iran to accept a ceasefire at the beginning of the war that would have forced it cede territory. When Iran held Iraqi land (Freedman 2008, 201-203), the demand was a return to the status quo. Also, while Iran was largely responsible for its own international isolation, the fact that the world was supplying its adversary while enforcing an embargo against it fueled oppression narratives. Finally, Iran blamed the U.S. for Iraq's use of chemical weapons. In an indirect sense, there was considerable merit to this accusation, but Iranian leaders were not concerned about nuance. In the absence of a smoking gun, Iranian newspapers (FBIS 1984_Jul 3) simply fabricated reports that the U.S. was supplying chemical weapons to Iraq, based upon rumors and flimsy evidence. With no way to disprove such claims, most Iranians probably took for granted that the U.S. was responsible for Iraq's chemical arsenal.

A final *layer* that became engrained on both sides of the U.S.-Iranian conflict throughout the Iran-Iraq War was the battle of threats and rhetoric. In general terms, Khomeini was famous for taunting the U.S. and predicting its demise at every turn, and his lieutenants followed suit. Perennial threats to block the Strait of Hormuz (FBIS 1984_Jan 03), which Iran had at best a limited capability of doing, became a ritualistic posturing exercise throughout the war. The institution of anti-Americanism in Iran also developed its own language, authored primarily by Khomeini, himself. The U.S. (Khomeini 1989b) (FBIS 1983, October 24) was the "Great Satan," characterized by "global arrogance" and "imperialism." Israel was the "Small Satan," and the term "Zionism" was applied to every affront to the Muslim world, including (curiously) Saddam Hussein's Baathist (somehow Zionist?) regime, which was underpinned by the "Great Satan." Iranian leaders and masses alike ritually chanted "Death to America" (Nada 2015) at all manner of official functions and mass demonstrations. This was frequently accompanied by the burning of the American flag. These rhetorical and ritual devices predated the Iran-Iraq War, but it was the constant state of war and emergency that allowed such practices to retain salience over time. The eight-year gestation period of the Iran-Iraq War was sufficient to imprint reflexive anti-Americanism into the very D.N.A. of the regime.

It is worth noting that Iranian propaganda developed a counterpart in the U.S., as well. This manifested itself more subtly than in Iran. Americans (though not above crude chants on occasion), were not given to ritual slogans calling for "Death to Iran." Instead, as pointed out by Beeman (2005, 40-43), references to Iran in everything from official statements to news commentary pervasively employed adjectives and word choices that carried negative connotations. This ensured that any discussion of Iran, even when couched as objective, was framed by overtones that automatically cast judgement. One particular word that became associated with Iran was "terrorism." As the following sections will discuss, Iran's own actions invited this label. However, the term "terrorism" grew to encompass almost

any form of political violence (including warfare) that might be associated with Iran. This would be a lasting legacy of the rhetorical battle of the 1980's.

Like the hostage crisis, the Iran-Iraq War did not directly cause the institutionalization of conflict between the U.S. and Iran. What it did was vastly widen the breadth of issues that became linked to the conflict on both sides. The menu of grievances available to leaders wishing to cash in politically on hostility toward the opposite side expanded considerably. The narratives shaping public perception created a well-spring of popular support that opportunistic leaders could draw upon for their own benefit. The conflict between the U.S. and Iran was working its way into the habitus of social groups on both sides.

Lebanon

Lebanon was an episode of the U.S.-Iranian conflict that never should have been. Iran's involvement in Lebanon initially had nothing to do with the U.S., and the U.S. peacekeeping mission in the country proved a futile and costly effort. Yet when Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982 with the intent of defeating the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), it drew both parties into the fray and started a chain of events that would help institutionalize the enmity between the U.S. and Iran. Lebanon (Freedman 2008, 126-127) had been plagued by factional infighting and civil war since the mid-1970's, inviting the machinations of its neighbors (especially Syria), and the PLO had had established their base in the war-torn country. Israel's invasion (Varady 2017, 84-87) was meant to score a quick victory against its adversary, but instead they became bogged down in protracted struggle and mired in the factional politics of Lebanon. Their invasion had nothing to do with the Shiite population of Southern Lebanon (Freedman 2008, 141-142), who bore them little animosity, but Israelis forces

callously trampled the Shiites in pursuit of the PLO, and when the operation dragged on, tensions grew. This was bound to pique Iran's interest.

Why did Iran choose to become involved in Lebanon? After all, they were fighting a war with Iraq, in which they were about to begin a major offensive, and having just recently vanquished the MEK insurgency (Axworthy 2013, 224-226), Khomeini was still consolidating his rule. First, Iran's clerics (Hamzeh 2004, 17-19, 22-26) had deep and historic familial ties with the Shiites of Lebanon. Second, the Lebanese militia Amal (Ranstorp 1997, 28-29), which had been active in that country's civil war, was closely tied to the network of Khomeini supporters in both Iraq and Iran that had originally propelled him to prominence. Some of Khomeini's lieutenants (Attai 2013, 139-142) and the founders of the IRGC had gained their initial experience fighting in Lebanon. Third, Lebanon offered an opportunity to export the revolution, which Khomeini had rhetorically advocated and many of his followers were anxious to do. This new front offered several enticing advantages. To begin with, it supplanted Saddam Hussein (Pollack 2004, 191) in his claim to lead the Islamic world in the fight against Israel. Beyond this, it supported the narrative that Iran's revolution was larger than just the overthrow of the Shah. It was a pan-Islamic movement with universal aims. By demonstrating that Shiites outside of Iran embraced Khomeini, it affirmed and legitimized the doctrine of *valayat-e faqih*, which had been largely foisted upon the Iranian people in 1979.

Lastly, the IRGC was on the ascendant after defeating the Kurdish uprising, crushing the MEK, and playing a leading role in expelling Iraq from Iranian soil. They constituted a large, professional, and well-funded organization of young radicals with dangerous skills in guerilla warfare, counterintelligence, and subversion. If forced to demobilize, this pillar of the regime could have become the clerics' biggest headache. To this effect, Axworthy (2013, 226-232) pointed out that it was the IRGC that most strongly advocated for continuing the war with Iraq, and one can only imagine that they clamored for an

opportunity to strike at Israel, as well. Exporting the revolution kept Khomeini's most dangerous supporters busy, while simultaneously proselytizing the Shiite world with his views. None of these issues had anything directly to do with the U.S., but they led to the formation of Lebanese Hezbollah, which the U.S. would come to know as one of its primary adversaries in the Middle East region, a new *layer* in the relationship with Iran.

In the immediate aftermath of Israel's invasion (Ranstorp 1997, 34-38), the IRGC deployed approximately 1,500 troops to Lebanon. These groups recruited and united Shiite factions that had splintered from Amal, training and equipping them for guerilla warfare, but also supplanting the Lebanese government by providing basic social welfare services to the local population. Spiritually, Lebanese clerics (Hamzeh 2004, 30-36) did not uniformly agree with Ayatollah Khomeini, but the IRGC recruited clerics, including Ayatollah Sheik Sayed Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, to support their cause, increasing the legitimacy of the fledgling organization. For the first few years, Hezbollah was an umbrella for a decentralized network of factions, but the organization would always retain this character. Ranstorp (1997, 63-65) explained that this confused the outside world and allowed for deniability, in addition to empowering key operatives to exercise initiative. The Iranians (Crist 2012, 122-125) supported and directed operations through a network that included diplomatic personnel in both Lebanon and Syria. They quickly discovered a particular talent in the form of a young militant named Imad Mugniyah. Mugniyah would become a prominent player in many of Hezbollah's most high-profile attacks. Although a clandestine operative, Iran formally commissioned Mugniyah into the Revolutionary Guard, an action that would compromise Iran's thin layer of plausible deniability as his profile increased. Hezbollah (Harik 2004, 40) focused their initial operations against Israeli forces, but in April 1983, coincident with the stalling of its first offensive into Iraq, it tested the waters against a U.S. target.

Why was the U.S. in Lebanon? When Israel's campaign against the PLO led to a siege of Beirut, the Lebanese government (Freedman 2008, 131-132) called for an international peacekeeping force to supervise the evacuation of the PLO. Bawley and Salpeter (1984, 111-122) argued that Reagan, viewing the world through a Cold War lens, sensed an opportunity to assert leadership in the region at the expense of the Soviet Union and its client, Syria. The initial mission (Bolger 1995, 171) lasted only a matter of weeks, but in September 1982, the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister (Bawley and Salpeter 1984, 151-155) (Harik 2004, 34-36) led to a massacre at the Sabra and Shatillah refugee camps. Prompted by an international outcry, and U.S. peacekeepers returned. Reagan (1982) intended the deployment to be a short mission with the limited goal of bolstering the Lebanese government, but reality proved far more complicated. U.S. forces found that factional divisions ran so deep that it was impossible to support the government without becoming entangled in the confessional conflict. Over the course of 1983 (Bolger 1995, 182-184), U.S. Marines increasingly skirmished with various militias, even calling naval gunfire on several occasions.

In this context, Hezbollah's first attack against the U.S. (Friedman 1983) was a bombing of the U.S. Embassy in West Beirut that occurred on April 18, 1983, killing 63, including 17 Americans. Iran's involvement (Farell 1983) became a publicly accepted fact in the coming months, but in the complicated environment the U.S. now faced, policymakers (Varady 2017, 127-134) chose not to retaliate. Hezbollah's second attack has become one of the most remembered events in the U.S.-Iranian relationship. On October 23, 1983 (Freedman 2008, 141), Hezbollah suicide bombers attacked the compound that housed the U.S. Marines, killing 241 (a simultaneous attack killed 58 French paratroopers). U.S. intelligence (Crist 2012, 133-135, 141) (Pollack 2004, 203-204) clearly attributed the attacks not only to Hezbollah but directly back to orders from Tehran. Reagan (Farrell 1983) promised not to let the act go unpunished, but as the U.S. invaded the island nation of Grenada (Molotsky 1983) two days later, a complex set of Cold War calculations complicated the issue.

Ultimately, paralysis (Pollack 2004, 204) (Freedman 2008, 143) within Reagan's own staff caused the U.S. to back out of a joint retaliatory strike planned with the French and Israelis. However, in response to harassing fire directed toward U.S. aircraft, the Reagan administration (Crist 2012, 148-149) directed a strike at Syrian anti-aircraft batteries in early December. The operation was poorly coordinated, and the U.S. lost two planes in the process. The next month, in January 1984, the U.S. declared Iran a state sponsor of terrorism, a relatively impotent gesture in the face of its inability to respond to aggression. In February (Freedman 2008, 144-145), under intense public pressure, Reagan pulled U.S. troops out of Lebanon. Hezbollah (Wright 1984) took another shot at the U.S. in September 1984, bombing the U.S. Embassy annex, and killing two more Americans. Again, U.S. intelligence (Crist 2012, 151-153) linked the attack squarely to Iran, but Reagan dithered and did not retaliate.

Institutionalization of the U.S.-Iranian conflict from the U.S. perspective started with another process of *displacement and conversion*. The U.S. entered Lebanon fixated on the Soviets, Syria, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iran was a distraction, at most, and this helped explain why Reagan attempted to ignore its provocations. By the time the U.S. left, all salient links between the Lebanon mission and its original priorities had faded out of view. Instead, the U.S. became fixated on Iran, with which it had unfinished business that has yet to be resolved. This helped propel Iran to the top of America's list of adversaries in the Middle East. Simultaneous to this process, the issue of terrorism became a new and potent *layer* in the relationship. Iran was not the first country to sponsor Islamic terrorism in modern times, and it did not invent suicide tactics. However, by combining martyrdom with vehicle-borne explosives, Khomeini's disciples created a form of poor-man's smart bomb that revolutionized the way in which guerilla tactics would be applied against both the West and Israel. Not only were Iranians viewed as extremists by the West for their human wave martyrdom operations against Iraq, but they became associated with suicide bombing in general. The Iranian-sponsored kidnapping operations in

Lebanon, which will be discussed in the next section, only added to the linkage that would increasingly be made between Iran and terrorism.

The terrorism *layer* brought a new complication with it as well, which would plague the U.S. for years to come. Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks, as pointed out by Freedman (2008, 146) were meant to be deniable, and the fractious nature of the groups involved increased the complexity of attribution. The Western concept of justice relies on a considerable burden of proof before retribution is seen as legitimate, but how much proof was required to attribute an attack. A shadow of doubt could always be raised. Even if attribution can be positively determined, what kind of response is appropriate? Terrorists themselves often hide in populated areas, dispersed instead of concentrated. How much collateral damage is acceptable in response for a terrorist attack before the U.S. would begin to look just as guilty as the terrorists? The Reagan administration was not prepared to wrestle with these questions as it encountered Iran in Lebanon, and succeeding administrations have struggled just as mightily. Regardless, by 1985, Iranian-sponsored terrorist actions prompted Reagan (Latham 1985) to call on U.S. allies to join him in a "declaration of war on international terrorism," a foreshadowing of how this *layer* would evolve in the coming decades.

As incidents of terrorism (of which Iranian-sponsored act were only a portion) multiplied through the 1980's, the Reagan administration attempted to take a hard line. After the hijacking of TWA flight 847 in 1985 (Latham 1985), Reagan called on U.S. allies to join him in a "declaration of war on international terrorism," a continuation of tough talk that he issued throughout his presidency. Less than a year later (Wilson and Hoffman 1986), in support of this policy, he authorized the April 1986 bombing of Libya in retaliation for its leader, Muammar Qadhafi's, sponsorship of terrorist acts. It is worth considering, however, that Libya was not Iran. Qhadaffi could not close the Strait of Hormuz or threaten other major oil producers, and with few resources of its own, it had relatively small value on

the Cold War chess board. Iran, on the other hand, was far more complicated, and its actions in Lebanon brought out issues that would haunt America's counterterrorism efforts for decades to come.

From an Iranian perspective, this episode in Lebanon looked like an unmitigated success, but in many ways, the Iranians would become victims of this success. First, in the terrorism *layer*, the Iranian experience taught them that the U.S. was unlikely to retaliate for terrorism and politically unable to sustain casualties. This strengthened hardline elements within the Iranian government and emboldened the IRGC. What they did not account for is that the U.S. would not forget Iran's actions, and this would play into future interactions, where the U.S. would show no sympathy for Iran. This became especially evident in 1988 after the U.S. accidently shot down an Iranian passenger plane, with little more than a tepid apology afterward. Second, in the same *layer*, the Iranians correctly perceived that attribution was an Achilles Heel for the U.S., but this caused them to overplay their hand. Covert action is hard to hide, and ultimately, it is just no fun if one does not eventually take credit for it, at least on some level. The presence of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (Apple 1983) in Lebanon was hardly secret. The *New York Times* accurately reported their numbers in October of 1983, along with their sponsorship of militant groups. Iran formally denied responsibility for the Lebanon bombings, but their role was so universally accepted that by 1987 (Boroumand and Boroumand 2002, 18), IRGC Chief Mohsen Rafiqdoust openly boasted to an Iranian newspaper that, "both the TNT and the ideology which in one blast sent to hell 400 officers, NCOs, and soldiers at the Marine headquarters have been [sic] provided by Iran." The cumulative effect of Iran's overreliance on the thin veil of deniability was that America and much of the West just simply assumed that Iran was guilty and stopped listening to its denials.

Lastly, one could argue that Hezbollah was its own *layer* of the relationship. One problem for Iran is that, while it would be held responsible for Hezbollah's actions, it did not fully control its creation. Even loyal assets like Imad Mugniyah could prove embarrassing. Mugniyah (Crist 2012, 155) helped to

engineer the hijacking of TWA flight 727 in June 1985 in order to free militia members (one was his brother) held in Kuwait for the December 1983 bombings in Kuwait City. Even if Khomeini or any faction in Iran's government approved the operation, they clearly did not intend to be become so openly implicated in the event. It cost the Iranians considerably in terms of international opinion, and Speaker Rafsanjani personally intervened to end the crisis. (Ranstorp (1997, 91-95, 116-130) also noted that Syria's interests diverged with Iran considerably in the late 1980's and Syria retained considerable influence over Hezbollah, as well.

Iran's activities in Lebanon and early sponsorship of terrorism against the U.S. did not happen in a vacuum. It took place in the context of the previous hostage crisis and concurrently with the Iran-Iraq War, in which the U.S. steadily increased its involvement. In a path-dependent fashion, actions by both sides scoped the menu of options available for future decisions. The institutional process of *layering* linked previously unrelated issues so actions in one arena would necessarily constrain actions in others. As the U.S. and Iran became increasingly tangled, the conditions were ripe for *displacement and conversion*, which moved the focus of either actor toward the other and facilitated the development of constituencies, which would eventually stake their own interests within the perpetuation of the conflict.

Iran-Contra Affair

Another *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict exacerbated by Iranian proxies in Lebanon was hostage taking. This *layer* was first established by the embassy hostage crisis, and Iranians learned that this practice struck at a key vulnerability within the West. Hostage taking in Lebanon was a time-honored tradition before the 1980's, but Hezbollah elevated the practice to the international stage. Exact numbers of hostages vary, but by one account (Crist 2012, 154), Iranian-sponsored groups kidnapped

almost 100 Western hostages throughout the decade, 25 of them American. The first U.S. hostage of the decade (Ranstorp 1997, 88-89) was David Dodge, the President of American University, who was abducted in July of 1982 at the direction of Revolutionary Guard personnel. Near the end of his captivity in 1983, the Iranians moved Dodge to Tehran, where he spent time in Evin Prison. This was a costly mistake because it clearly revealed Iran's hand in the operation. This would be the last time (Crist 2012, 154) Iranian operatives would participate directly in kidnapping. From that point on, the IRGC provided training and resources, but used Hezbollah as a surrogate for hostage-taking. Starting in 1984, Mugniyah and his Hezbollah compatriots (United States. Congress… 1987, 160) began an aggressive campaign of kidnappings that included the murder of CIA Station Chief William Buckley. By June 1985 (Library of Congress 1985, 8), they were holding seven U.S. hostages, along with a number of British and French. These hostages provided the impetus for another key moment in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, the Iran-Contra Affair.

Much like Carter before him, Reagan (Pollack 2004, 215) took a deep personal interest in the fate of these U.S. hostages. Just as importantly, a camp developed within his administration (United States. President's Special Review Board… 1987, 112-121) (Draper 1991, 148-151), led primarily by the CIA and his own National Security Council (NSC) Staff that worried that the Soviets were better poised than the U.S. to make inroads with post-Khomeini Iran. This was a clear sign that the conflict with Iran was not fully entrenched at this point, and some officials viewed the Islamic Revolution as a bump in the road instead of a permanent change in Iranian politics. In fact, Crist (2012, 181) pointed out that Reagan himself had sent three letters to Iranian leaders before his 1984 reelection, urging them to improve relations with the U.S. - all unanswered. Influenced in part by Israeli officials and contacts, some of Reagan's staff (Draper 1991, 151-154) believed that a "moderate" faction was developing in Iranian politics that dissented from Khomeini's radicalism. They felt that if they could negotiate with these "moderates," they could undermine Khomeini and secure the release of the hostages. Israel was

already selling weapons to Iran and had an interest in expanding the scope of their sales (United States. Congress… 1987, 163-165), so a shady Iranian-born merchant and gray arms dealer named Manucher Ghorbanifar (whom the CIA had previously rejected as an asset for failing polygraph tests) began to broker introductions with Iranian officials regarding the possibility of trading arms for hostages.

These U.S. officials were entirely correct (Crist 2012, 182-183) that factional politics were playing out in Iran, but they had no way of understanding the nature or scope. Speaker of Parliament Hashemi Rafsanjani indeed led a "pragmatist" camp within the clerical establishment, and given the exigencies of the Iran-Iraq War, he advocated improving relations with the West. However, Rafsanjani and his followers were entirely loyal to Khomeini and his *valayat-e faqih*, and he viewed engagement with the West entirely in transactional terms. Khomeini himself approved the arms-for-hostages negotiations, but when he did so, it threatened the influence of the hardliners, who had previously held the greatest sway and fiercely opposed Rafsanjani. It was this faction that ultimately unhinged the negotiations.

The Reagan administration was divided in its support for this effort, and the Secretaries of Defense and State (United States. Congress… 1987, 163-165) both consistently opposed any opening to Iran. However, the CIA Director approved, and NSC staffer Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North (Walsh and U.S. 1994, 1-10, 21-24, 71) had already built an impressive covert infrastructure he was using to skirt Congressional mandates and equip the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, a conflict that never should have involved Iran in any way. Armed with vague and waffling guidance from Reagan himself (Draper 1991, 156-160, 166-169, 315-331), the NSC and the CIA pursued the Israeli connection, negotiated with Iran, and proceeded to deliver weapons and equipment (most notably anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles). The results were unimpressive, and Hezbollah released only one hostage between August 1985 and July 1986. In May 1986, a delegation including North secretly traveled to Tehran, hoping to

negotiate directly with Iranian leaders and eliminate the abounding roadblocks to progress. After several days on the ground, it became apparent that the effort languished at the mercy of factional politics within Iran, and Iranian leaders might not have completely controlled Hezbollah at all. In the end, the Americans (Crist 2012, 190-195) were rushed to the airport when hardliners attempted to rally a violent protest against their presence. The abortive Tehran mission notwithstanding, Iran released two more hostages as the weapons shipments continued. North also successfully brokered a direct channel with Iranian leaders (Draper 1991, 394-416) (Secord 1986), avoiding the confusion of Israeli middlemen. In September, he personally gave a relative and representative of Rafsanjani a tour of the White House, probably the zenith of this exercise in positive engagement with Iran. It would be short-lived.

In September and October, Hezbollah took three more American hostages (Pollack 2004, 213), completely negating the effect of the three they had released. In November 1986, an Iranian hardline supporter who had fallen out of favor with Khomeini sponsored an article in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Shiraa* (FBIS 1986c) that exposed the U.S. mission to Tehran the previous May. While not entirely accurate, it also provided a rare and unauthorized glimpse into the murky world of factional infighting in Iran. Ayatollah Montazeri (FBIS 1986d), who had been widely seen as Khomeini's designated successor, made a public statement referring to the matter that embarrassed Khomeini. The ensuing scandal (Amanat 2017, 860) led to the execution of the story's sponsor and eventually to Montazeri's political demise. Not only did the incident politically damage everybody involved on the Iranian side, but secrecy unraveled within the U.S., as well. As scrutiny increased, it became apparent that, not only had the Iranians been stringing U.S. negotiators along with no accountability (United States. Congress… 1987, 168-170), but North had illegally diverted the proceeds of weapon sales (Walsh and U.S. 1994, 1-10, 21-24, 71) to Iran to support the Contra rebels. This led to months of dramatic investigations and

Congressional hearings that could potentially have led to Reagan's impeachment, had not North very publicly perjured himself (the opinion of most) to obscure the president's culpability.

For both the U.S. and Iran, the key institutional innovation presented by the Iran-Contra episode was the new *layer* of scandal, and this *layer* was larger than the sum of its parts. On the U.S. side, Pollack (2004, 216) and Crist (2012, 203-205) pointed out that Reagan's double-dealing created a massive credibility gap with the Gulf partners the U.S. had been courting since 1979. Further, while Iraq would still accept U.S. help (Gibson 2010, 179), the relationship became more militarized and transactional. The U.S. lost most of its diplomatic clout with Saddam Hussein. Another result was that Reagan was forced to publicly get tough on Iran, foreclosing any future cooperation, and this change became apparent during the end of his administration as the U.S. engaged in open naval combat against Iran.

Beyond issues of credibility, the Iran-Contra scandal tainted the entire concept of engagement with Iran. The story might have been different if Iran had actually secured the release of more hostages, but Reagan was played for a fool on the world stage, and Iran showed that it could not be trusted. Openings toward Iran became a political third rail for U.S. politicians. As coming years would show, even when they made sense from a geopolitical standpoint, they were not worth the risk for political leaders. Tough talk against Iran, on the other hand, would always sell. Ironically, the actual crimes of the Iran-Contra Affair related more to support for the Contras and financial malfeasance, yet it was the U.S.-Iranian relationship that would be haunted by the legacy of this scandal for years to come.

In Iran, the scandal *layer* deeply intertwined with the domestic politics *layer*. Khomeini himself had personally fostered the radical, reactionary elements that undermined his own efforts to support Rafsanjani in a pragmatic opening to the West. In doing so, he effectively tied his own hands. Like Reagan, he was forced to defend his credibility by doubling down on tough action and policies against

America. Amanat (2017, 860) argued that this contributed to some of the more extreme decisions at the end of his life, including the February 1989 fatwa for the death of Salman Rushdie. Speaker Rafsanjani was a much savvier political actor, deflecting blame (FBIS 1986b) and distancing himself from the effort, all while leaving a door open for future engagement. As future president, Rafsanjani would attempt a general thaw in relations with the West, but his hardline rivals would always be able to accuse him of hypocrisy. In a similar fashion to U.S. politics, engagement with the U.S. became a toxic subject. Absolving themselves of responsibility for the scandal, Iranian leaders added a new twist to their narrative concerning the U.S. They claimed that the U.S., operating from a position of weakness, had attempted to entice Iran into a dubious rapprochement deal. Iran had exposed their duplicity and rebuffed the offer. Until the U.S. accomplished some impossible gesture of "good faith" and contrition, it could never be trusted… Iran's narrative could neatly accommodate any manner of real or perceived wrongs by the U.S.

Finally, another piece of *displacement and conversion* took final form as the public scandal of Iran-Contra unfolded. Crist (2012, 201) observed that, "In truth, the arms-to-Iran initiative continued a five-year-long strategy, one deeply rooted in Cold War fears of revolution Iran falling under the Soviet sphere." However, by the time the Iran-Contra investigations concluded in 1987, U.S. officials no longer thought of Iran in terms of the Soviet threat. Iran was a menace in its own rite. Perhaps this was inevitable as Mikhail Gorbachev took the helm of the U.S.S.R. in 1985, quickly introducing the concepts of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Certainly, the Soviet Union appeared less menacing, but even still, nobody predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the subsequent dissolution of the U.S.S.R. It might have been expected that, stripped of its Cold War utility, Iran would be seen in a different light. Animosity, however, was not a foregone conclusion. The Iran-Contra Affair helped insure that as fears of the Soviet Union subsided, they would be redirected squarely to a new regional adversary, Iran.

The events surrounding the Iran-Contra Affair did much to help institutionalize the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Iran's complicity in hostage taking entrenched patterns of action on the Iranian side and perceptions within the U.S. The scandals that ensued after the U.S. and the Islamic Republic made their first attempt at engagement led to political polarization on both sides. Gone were the days when pragmatists in either camp could afford to advocate rapprochement. An institution of animosity was taking shape, but it did not yet have a clearly defined address. These developments laid the groundwork for constituencies to take hold on both sides and provide the missing ingredient for intractable conflict.

Tanker War

Another facet of the Iran-Iraq War involved attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf. Both sides conducted attacks throughout the war (Glenn and U.S. 1987, 8-9) (Gamlen and Rogers 1993, 125), but the preponderance were perpetrated by Iraq. Iran found itself disadvantaged in this arena. First (Johnson 2011, 139-141, 145) (Pollack 2004, 224), Iraq primarily used aircraft to attack ships, and it benefitted from the tacit support of its Gulf Arab neighbors who allowed overflight of their airspace, whereas Iran's air capabilities deteriorated throughout the war; it relied on a rag-tag navy to interdict shipping. Second, Iran transported most of its oil by its own flagged carriers, making its ships legitimate targets under international conventions. Third-party nations trafficked Iraqi oil, so even though Iran conducted fewer overall attacks, its accosted nominally neutral parties and drew widespread condemnation.

For most of the war, attacks in the Persian Gulf drew little more than verbal condemnation from the international community, even as they increased. There were several reasons, but chief among

them, the price of oil (Johnson 2011, 140) remained unaffected. Beyond this, tankers are difficult to sink and were rarely sent to the bottom (Glenn and U.S. 1987, 8-9), and Iraq (Library of Congress 1984, 12-14) inadvertently absorbed most of the risk premiums associated with its own actions. This situation changed after Iran captured the Fao Peninsula in 1986 (Gamlen and Rogers 1993, 125-127) within missile range of Kuwait City. Kuwaiti tankers (Johnson 2011, 147-148) previously absorbed only a small fraction of Iran's attacks, but seeking superpower patronage against the expanded Iranian threat, Kuwait requested that the U.S. reflag and escort its tankers in the Persian Gulf.

The U.S. reacted coolly at first to Kuwait's request (Pollack 2004), having little to gain for putting U.S. ships at risk. Kuwait then forced Reagan's hand by making the same request of the Soviets, who accepted and conducted a number of reflagging operations. This rapidly changed U.S. calculus, and the Reagan administration scrambled to become Kuwait's leading patron. However, before ascribing Cold War motives as the chief impetus for U.S. involvement, it should be considered that the Soviets were on their heels in Afghanistan and Gorbachev's leadership was making the Soviet Union far less menacing. Freedman (2008, 196-197) pointed out that some U.S. officials even advocated cooperating with the Soviets in Persian Gulf security. More importantly, this drama played out in the throes of the Iran-Contra scandal. As Gamlen and Rogers (1993, 131-133) deduced, the enthusiasm with which Reagan's administration latched onto the mission almost certainly suggests that they jumped at the opportunity to assert U.S. dominance in the region vis-a-vis Iran and reestablish credibility with the Gulf Arab States. Nevertheless, while the U.S. increased its Persian Gulf presence, it apparently did not expect open confrontation.

Iran had a far different perspective, viewing Persian Gulf disputes as family matters. Its leaders excoriated Kuwait for the "evil act" (FBIS 1987_JUL 27) of bringing superpowers into the conflict and threatened the country (Ward 2009, 283) by deploying a Silkworm battery to the Fao Peninsula. In

Iran's halls of power, a familiar struggle continued (Crist 2012, 241-242). The IRGC strongly advocated open warfare with the U.S. Navy. Rafsanjani recognized the counter-productive nature of such an approach, but unable to fully stem the influence of the radicals, he sold Khomeini on an asymmetric strategy that gave Iran some plausible deniability, using naval mines. Ironically, it was not Iran but Iraq that struck the first blow in the "Tanker War" between the U.S. and Iran. In a confluence of tragic errors (Wilson 1987) (Zatarain 2008, 7-25, 37-54) (Wise 2013, 14-51), an Iraqi aircraft seeking Iranian tankers in May 1987 targeted the U.S.S. Bridgeton with an anti-ship missile, killing 37 sailors and wounding 21. Iranian leaders gloated over the tragedy (FBIS 1987_May 18), predicting the U.S. would be driven out of the Gulf as they had been from Lebanon, and fed conspiracy theories (FBIS 1987_May 20) regarding responsibility. The incident served as a wakeup call to the U.S. Navy but also an inflection point for the Reagan administration (Freedman 2008, 201-203). Facing increased pressure over its Persian Gulf policy, Reagan was forced to double down. Iran, not Iraq, would take the heat for the U.S.S. *Stark* incident.

The details of the Tanker War between the U.S. and Iran are well covered by Zatarain (2008) but beyond the scope of this dissertation. This section will provide a short overview in order to discuss the institutional aspects. The Iranians employed mines (Zatarain 2008, 63-74)(Wise 2013, 52-73) against the first U.S. escort convoy in July 1997, denying responsibility (FBIS 1987_JUL 24) but crediting "invisible hands" for exposing U.S. vulnerability and damaging its credibility in the region. In the ensuing months, Iran conducted a series of provocative naval maneuvers, along with missile attacks against Kuwaiti facilities and neutral shipping. The U.S. quickly built up its own naval forces in the region, even repurposing an oil exploration barge as a mobile base, and it deployed Special Operations troops and helicopters. The U.S. (Wise 2013, 92-116) (Zatarain 2008, 101-124) very publicly captured and destroyed an Iranian frigate caught in the act of mining, and it attacked Iranian oil platforms used as military bases. The climax came in April 1988 (Cushman 1988), after the U.S.S. Roberts struck a mine

and nearly sank. In response, the U.S. conducted Operation Praying Mantis (Johnson 2011, 173-174) (Zatarain 2008, 205-221) (Wise 2013, 188-218), which ultimately destroyed three Iranian naval platforms, sank an Iranian frigate and several smaller vessels, and severely damaged a second frigate. This significantly reduced Iran's naval power in a single day, coincident (Ward 2009, 283) with Iraq's successful push to drive the Iranians from the Fao Peninsula.

The IRGC did not give up, though, and they continued (Johnson 2011, 175) (Zatarain 2008, 379-382) their provocations and attacks on shipping until July 1988. On July 3, 1988, the U.S.S. *Vincennes* conducted an aggressive patrol against Iranian fast boats, and in the resulting confusion, mistook the commercial flight Iran Air 655 for a hostile aircraft. The Vincennes destroyed the aircraft, killing all 280 civilians on board. The Reagan administration (Gibson 2010, 221-222) (Zatarain 2008, 311-328) (Wise 2013, 219-232) and the U.S. Navy admitted that this was a tragic accident but largely blamed Iran for creating the conditions conducive to mistakes. Based upon initial reports, most which turned out to be wrong, the U.S. population viewed Iran as more to blame than the U.S. Navy. Public sentiment against Iran had also hardened Americans to the human cost of this tragedy. The ensuing "Fogarty Report" (U.S. Department of Defense 1988) generated years of controversy for the U.S. Navy, but little of this discussion suggested contrition toward Iran. Iranian leaders expressed all the outrage demanded by such an occasion, but when they (Gibson 2010, 221-222) sent a delegation to speak at the U.N., it found little international sympathy and was instead bombarded by demands to accept U.N.S.C.R 598 and end the war. Depleted and diplomatically isolated (Wise 2013, 233-234) (Johnson 2011, 176), Iran withdrew its final forces from Iraqi territory on July 14, 1988. It requested a ceasefire on July 17.

The Tanker War clearly added *layers* to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. On the U.S. side, America had been building a significant security architecture of regional partnerships and agreements, but its credibility was damaged by the Iran-Contra scandal. This *layer* compelled Reagan to assert U.S.

dominance in the region. Prior to this episode, the U.S. did not have a regular presence in the Persian Gulf, keeping its naval forces outside the relatively confining waters of the Gulf. After the Tanker War, the U.S. maintained a near permanent presence for the entire duration under study. The U.S. and Iran had become neighbors, a trend that would grow in coming decades, and a significant new *layer* to the relationship. Naval brinksmanship was another *layer* that rose from this development. Challenged by the U.S. presence (Nadimi 2020, 43-44), Iran consistently disputed the right of U.S. forces to patrol the Gulf and declared themselves the rightful guarantors of Gulf security. Iranian fast boats would provoke U.S. naval vessels so frequently in coming decades that incidents simply ceased to make the news.

Layering from the Tanker war occurred even more thickly on the Iranian side. First, the Iranians again demonstrated the predilection toward radicalism and initiative that had manifested itself in the embassy hostage crisis, Lebanon, and the domestic political infighting surrounding the arms-for-hostages deal. Per Crist (2012, 244-245), after Khomeini's council decided to proceed with a mining operation against the first U.S. convoy (turning down the frontal assault recommended by the IRGC), Khomeini himself had to intervene to reign in Guard Commander Mohsen Rezai, who personally authorized a boat strike against the convoy in contravention of the council decision. One could view this as mere insubordination, but Khomeini had fostered a climate which encouraged subordinates to pursue contradictory policies, only intervening when he thought necessary. Throughout the approximately 12 months of naval conflict, Iran continued to press its attacks and provocations, even at times to the point of futility. It is difficult to ascertain how much of this derived from centrally directed strategy and how much was driven by the personalities of individual commanders. This belligerence fed the U.S. narrative that Iran was irrational, and it called into question the utility of trying to negotiate with Iran about anything, especially if nobody appeared to be in control.

Perhaps the strongest *layer* on the Iranian side was that of grievances. Iran had already amassed a lengthy list of grievances (real and imagined) against the U.S. before the Tanker War, but this added more. First, the Iranians saw themselves as unfairly persecuted by the international community for targeting neutral shipping. They believed (with some validity) that the Gulf Arab states were siding with Iran, and because they claimed the Persian Gulf as their territory, they believed they had the right to retaliate for Iraqi attacks on its own shipping by targeting the interests of those states. Second, as previously mentioned, they viewed direct intervention by the U.S. in Persian Gulf matters as meddling in their sphere of influence. This is why Iranian leaders were so incensed at Kuwait for asking for U.S. help. The fact that the U.S. Navy established a continual presence along the Iranian coastline afterward only exacerbated this grievance. Most importantly, the shootdown of Iran Air 655 was an unforgivable sin for many Iranians, still commemorated today, much the way the U.S. remembers the Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon. It is telling that Iran's accidental shootdown of a Ukrainian passenger jet on January 8, 2020 (Zraick 2020), while out of the scope of this dissertation, drew so many parallels for both American and Iranian observers. In spite of otherwise heated U.S. rhetoric, there was little that the Trump administration could say in response to Iran's mistake, considering Iran Air 655.

For most military historians, the tanker war between the U.S. and Iran amounted to little more than a skirmish. Casualties were low (from a comparative standpoint), and posturing aside, direct combat was limited. The campaign garnered press coverage in the moment but was quickly overtaken by other events. However, the framework by which this action would be evaluated by the U.S. and Iranian publics had been set by previous events. Instead of being forgotten as militarily insignificant, the memories were subsumed into the larger picture of a conflict that now appeared less like an anomaly and more like a natural state of affairs. As the Cold War entered its final days, both the U.S. and Iran were now building their worlds around this new conflict between each other.

Death of Khomeini

The death of Ayatollah Khomeini was an inflection point in the history of Iran. Khomeini both represented and largely embodied the regime that he established, and given the power he amassed to his own position, his successor was poised to gain considerable latitude in determining the future direction of Iran. Before he died however, Khomeini made two significant decisions that would have lasting institutional consequences for the U.S.-Iranian relationship. First, on February 14, 1989 he proclaimed his infamous *fatwa* condemning author Salman Rushdie to death for writing the book *Satanic Verses*, adding a new and unsavory *layer* to the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Second, Khomeini formally dismissed his designated heir, Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, on March 26. Both of these decisions were intrinsically linked, and Iran's domestic politics *layer* weighed again on the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

Ayatollah Montazeri manifested himself as the logical choice of successor to Khomeini from the early days of the Revolution. He was one of few individuals with the religious qualifications for the position (Akhavi 2008, 645-650). Unlike some Shiite jurists in 1979, he openly supported Khomeini's concept of *valayat-e faqih*, even chairing the original Assembly of Experts which helped enshrine it in the Iranian constitution. But Montazeri's vision for the role of the *faqih* had always been more limited than Khomeini's, and his writings and speeches suggest that it narrowed over time. Like Khomeini, Montazeri was radical in advocating the politicization of Islam and the export of the revolution, but unlike the Supreme Leader, he was passionate about social justice and protecting people. In 1984 (Abrahamian 1999, Chapter 3) for instance, he openly challenged the regime's treatment of political prisoners, taking over the prisons for a period and instituting some reforms. Thus, while both railed against the West, Montazeri's animus arose from a different place. At several points through the early years of the Islamic Republic, Montazeri raised a dissenting voice and subtly challenged Khomeini. This

spilled into the open after the revelations surrounding the Iran-Contra Affair, leading to an open rift and the execution of his lieutenant, Hashemi.

In July 1988 (Office of Imam Khomeini 1989), the MEK (the Marxist-Islamist militant group that challenged Khomeini unsuccessfully in 1981) conducted a brief but bloody offensive from Iraq into Iranian territory, and Iran decisively defeated its forces. In the aftermath of the operation (FBIS 1989_Mar 31), Khomeini approved a mass purge of thousands of political prisoners, many associated with the MEK, but including others, as well. Montazeri publicly called attention to this act and challenged Khomeini, leading to the release of several hundred prisoners that might otherwise have faced execution. Multiple factors likely contributed to Khomeini's endorsement of genocide, not the least of which was his own personal ire against the MEK, but there is another important factor to consider. For most, the 1979 revolution was not originally about establishing *valayat-e faqih*. The binding force among the people was the legacy (deserved or not) of oppression by the Shah. Most of the Islamic Republic's first leaders drew legitimacy from their credentials as prisoners of the former SAVAK.

Khomeini's regime, however, had proven more brutal and repressive than the former Shah, arresting political prisoners in waves (supporters of the Shah, then the MEK, then the Tudeh Party), along with anybody else deemed threatening to the government. Some were killed, the regime going to great lengths to erase their existence, but many more were held for years in appalling conditions and tortured. For a time, the strategy of the regime was (like the Shah before) to discredit its adversaries by forcing them to make public recantations, but soon these events became a source of embarrassment, only drawing attention to the regime's harsh methods. As the Iran-Iraq War drew to a close, these political prisoners became a liability. It would now be more difficult to hide them from public scrutiny, but if they were released, their stories would testify to the hypocrisy of the Islamic Republic. The MEK

offensive in late July provided an only-to-convenient excuse to solve this problem by murder. Therefore, when Montazeri took his stand, he was not only challenging Khomeini on a specific point, he was airing the regime's dirty laundry and undermining the very legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

On February 12, 1988 (FBIS 1989_Feb 13), in a ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the Islamic Republic, Montazeri made a series of critical remarks regarding the direction the revolution and called on Iranians to admit mistakes and help curb its excesses, which would also help mend its relationship with the outside world. Khomeini was incensed (FBIS 1989_) and two days later, he issued his *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie - one of the most apparently arbitrary acts of his tenure. A number of authors, such as Edelman and Takeyh (2018, 109), have diagnosed this move as Khomeini's final attempt to radicalize his own population and secure his legacy. Controversy over the *fatwa* polarized the Muslim world and drew a sharp contrast between Islam and the West, painting Khomeini as the champion of Islam and making life uncomfortable for moderates of all stripes. Most authors, however, fail to connect the fatwa to the internal power struggle taking place within Iran.

The Rushdie *fatwa* was more than just a shot across the bow to an errant protégé. Given the factional rivalry that raged behind the scenes (Wright 1987) (Milani, Abbas 2010) (Ehteshami 1991, 148-149) for the first 10 years of the Islamic Republic, especially between Rafsanjani's pragmatists and Montazeri's radical followers, Khomeini's imminent demise can only have intensified the competition. Montazeri (FBIS 1989_Feb 25), perhaps in an attempt to placate Khomeini, openly expressed support for the Rushdie fatwa, but it mattered little. The die had been cast. However, Khomeini must have known that dethroning his heir apparent meant handing an unqualified victory to the pragmatist camp. Throughout his tenure, Khomeini had exercised power by maintaining a balance between rival factions, and this final act would leave the equation unbalanced - in favor of the camp that he had generally favored least until that point. This *fatwa* deliberately complicated Rafsanjani's efforts to normalize

Iran's relations with the outside world and provided other radicals a final boost to help them undermine his state-building efforts. When Khomeini formally dismissed Montazeri in March 1989 (Khomeini 1989b), his blistering letter lashed out against "liberals" as specific enemies of the Islamic Republic, perhaps as much a rebuke to the pragmatists as the erstwhile hardliners.

The Salman Rushdie *fatwa* had enduring institutional consequences for the both the U.S. and Iran, adding a new *layer* which affected both for years to come. Western countries were horrified, but apart from condemnation, there was little they could do. Rushdie (Rushdie 2012), a famous author, began a personal odyssey of years in hiding under various levels of police protection, always fearing for his safety. His apologies and entreaties fell on deaf ears while radicalized individuals threatened to carry out this *fatwa*. Iranian leaders have since alternated between downplaying and reaffirming the *fatwa*, but it has never been rescinded. Even if Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, decided to countermand it, there is no guarantee that he would have had the clout (in the eyes of radical Islamists) to effectively do so.

Khomeini's attempt to drive a symbolic wedge between Islam and the West could hardly have been more successful. U.S. audiences needed little convincing that Khomeini (and hence Iranians in general) stood starkly opposed to both Western values and modern conceptions of human rights. This directly fed narratives like Samuel Huntington's (1993) "The Clash of Civilizations?" Another such voice, Rauch (2005), opined that the "war on terrorism" began with the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the idea that Islamic leaders like Khomeini could impose Sharia law on the rest of the world through violence and intimidation. He drew a direct line of descent from Khomeini to later Islamic radicals like Osama Bin Laden (ignoring the Sunni-Shia divide). For Americans, who had experienced a taste of helplessness and insecurity at the hands of Iran through the hostage crises in both Tehran and Lebanon, Khomeini's *fatwa* brought these feelings one step closer to home. In Iran, the factionalism that fuels

constituency development was stronger than ever, and in the U.S., the narratives and perceptions that made opposition to Iran a winning political position had taken root.

Constituencies in the First Decade

The first decade of conflict between the U.S. and Iran had a formative impact on all the constituencies that would later serve to perpetuate animosity over the course of 40 years. Constituencies, as repositories of institutional conflict, take time to develop. Iran's clerical establishment and the IRGC manifested themselves much earlier than the others, but even still, the long-term role they would play was hardly set in stone. The U.S. Congress and Israel, on the other hand, would not begin to behave as recognizable constituents until a decade later, but the forces shaping their role were actively at work throughout the 1980's. CENTCOM occupied a middle ground between the two sides. It developed the characteristics of a constituent in the 1980's, but its broad mission and competing priorities could have pulled it in other directions had events played differently in the following years. This section will examine each constituency in turn.

Clerical establishment

The clerical establishment was arguably the first constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict. Khomeini made a deliberate choice to leverage the embassy takeover and hostage crisis for his own domestic political advantage, and his supporters followed suit. This led to a spiral of competing radicalism and established a long-term trend in which anti-Americanism became the lowest common denominator for politicians - the safe option. It also demonstrated the institutional process of

displacement and conversion, as Khomeini replaced the Shah with a new threat to rally his countrymen against. This played into the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's involvement in Lebanon, both of which strengthened Khomeini's grip on power. After defeating the secular nationalists, the MEK, and Iran's Tudeh Party within the country, the IRP swept the 1984 parliament elections (Farhi 2015), ensuring firm clerical control of all aspects of the Iranian government. However, moving to a single-party system did not unite Khomeini's supporters; it only exacerbated factional divides. It also built a false sense of support for the Iran-Iraq War because dissenting voices had been removed. Additionally, while Iran's war against the world had been a boon to the IRP, the pressures and privations wrought by the war with Iraq were taking their toll. International isolation was not good for Iran, as a whole.

Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani was the most prominent politician in Iran to recognize this fact. Rafsanjani (FBIS 1986b) lectured the U.S. rhetorically at every opportunity, apparently hewing to the party line of the IRP, but his speeches almost always kept a door open for some kind of improvement in relations. This was a form of deliberate ambiguity that Iranians (always subject to censorship and reprisals) read far more significance into than did Western audiences. He was also known for providing eloquent rationalizations or apologetics for the regime's hardline positions, making concepts like "export of the revolution" (FBIS 1984_Oct 31) sound less threatening to Western audiences. Over the course of his career (Wright 2017), Rafsanjani developed a reputation at home and abroad as a consummate politician and master manipulator. Rafsanjani's reputation as a pragmatist came not from any affinity toward the U.S., but because, like mafia bosses in popular crime movies who claim to deplore violence because it is "bad for business," he generally viewed the export of the revolution and ideological antagonism against the West as counterproductive for Iran. This put him at odds with the hardline ideological element of the clerical establishment, which came to be led by Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who was once expected to replace Khomeini after his death.

One small example illustrates, first Rafsanjani's pragmatism, but also the depth to which conflict with the U.S. had been institutionalized by the middle of the decade. Rafsanjani (2007, 173) (Mohammadi 2013) published a short, somewhat cryptic passage in his 2007 memoir which suggested that he went to Khomeini in 1984 and advocated dropping the rhetorical practice of shouting "Death to…," specific enemies of the regime, especially America. Khomeini agreed, pending an "opportunity" to do so. A brief exchange in Parliament then echoed this decision for the public record. The Iranian press ignored the exchange and published nothing about it. Instead, the international headlines in Iran's conservative-dominated newspapers that week offered a fabricated story (FBIS 1984a) (*Ettelaat* 1984, Jul 4) about the U.S. supplying chemical weapons to Iraq, a "historic announcement" (*Jomhouri Eslami* 1984b) by Ayatollah Khomeini that blamed the U.S. for Iran's economic woes, and a laundry list of other threats and accusations levied toward the U.S.[4] Tellingly, even in 2007 (Tait, 2007), Rafsanjani's revelation drew a storm of controversy from the hardline press (specifically Kayhan newspaper) which accused Rafsanjani of deliberately distorting Khomeini's views.

What this story shows is that, regardless of Khomeini's actual views (or even the veracity of the story), the "opportunity" to adjust course was never to be. Khomeini had made himself a captive to his own hardline rhetoric, and the radical supporters that he personally fostered were not about to allow an opening for the Iranian government to walk back its narrative. Rafsanjani continued to push pragmatism at various points, intervening (Crist 2012, 155) to resolve the TWA 727 hijacking when Hezbollah embarrassed Iran on the international stage, and creating the impetus for Iran's participation in the arms-for-hostages (Iran-Contra) debacle. However, Rafsanjani's pragmatism only thinly veiled his political cunning and ambition. It was little accident that the fallout from the arms-for-hostages dealing

[4] Additional stories (Ettelaat 1984d) (Jomhouri Eslami 1984c) linked the U.S. to Iraq's war effort, fostered conspiracies about U.S. designs for the region (Ettelaat 1984a) (Jomhouri Eslami (1984a), and conveyed threats from Iran's top naval commander (Ettelaat 1984b) that Iran would not tolerate transgressions by the U.S. in the Persian Gulf.

damaged his rival, Montazeri (whom Khomeini publicly chastened) (Amanat 2017, 860). Rafsanjani continued to strengthen his political position throughout the second half of the decade, as Khomeini dissolved the IRP (Fairbanks 1998, 21), ensuring that it could not develop a base of power rival to his own. In 1989, Rafsanjani (Wright 2000, 21) (Wright 2017) (Milani 1994, 222-225, 228-229) helped to engineer the elimination of the position of Prime Minister, and he orchestrated his own rise to the presidency while positioning his more malleable partner, Ali Khamenei to succeed Khomeini as Supreme Leader.

Had Rafsanjani's blatant power grab afforded him complete and unfettered control of Iran, the clerical establishment might have lost its relevance as a constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict with the passing of Khomeini. This was not the case, though. As Rafsanjani amassed power and prestige, Iran's hardliners became even more reliant on radicalism as a tool to check his power. Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, one of the last acts of his life, served this cause and gave Rafsanjani's opponents ammunition. Rafsanjani (Takeyh 2012, 56-57) (Hunter 1989, 138) at first attempted to distance himself from this edict but was ultimately compelled to openly support it, at the cost of any goodwill he might have garnered with the West.

This pattern would continue after Khomeini's death, as the clerical establishment staked its own fortunes to a legacy of anti-Americanism. The domestic politics *layer* was making it impossible for Iran to speak with a single voice, and Khomeini's (1989a, 14, 22, 45) last will and testament helped to perpetuate this state of affairs. Mostly a fiery recap and defense of the doctrine he promoted in life, Khomeini emphasized two key themes. One was resistance against the U.S., which was "by nature the master of international terrorism." This document preemptively undermined the legitimacy of any future leader attempting to negotiate with the "Great Satan." The other was disdain for proponents of liberalism in Iran (Khomeini labeled those advocating a separation between religion and the state as

"ignoramuses"). Though Iran's founders may not have originally envisioned permanent hostility with the U.S., a path-dependent process ensured that by the end of the decade the clerical establishment had been codified as a constituent to the conflict.

IRGC and clerical security forces

If the clerical establishment was the first constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, the IRGC (along with the other clerical security forces) was a close second. Since its inception, the IRGC was a pillar of Khomeini's revolutionary ideology, and it embraced anti-Americanism and export of the revolution with exceptional fervor. The IRGC confronted the U.S. directly (or by proxy) in Lebanon, Kuwait (its proxies bombed the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait City, among other targets in December 1983 (Gibson 2010, 112-113, 125-126)), and over the waters of the Persian Gulf, adding institutional *layers* to the conflict in each campaign. The Iran-Iraq War, however, was the defining event for the IRGC, and while the U.S. did not consider itself at war with Iran, the IRGC considered itself at war with the U.S.

The IRGC (Ostovar 2016, 64-75, 86-88) (Katzman 1993, 82, 89-91) began the Iran-Iraq war completely unprepared as a military organization, a hodgepodge of militias run by ideologues instead of professional soldiers. By 1986, it had grown to 350,000 personnel (not including the larger Basij), and by the war's end, it had fully eclipsed the conventional military within Iran's power structure. Over the course of the war, it amassed armor and artillery, along with developing modest naval and air (focused largely on missiles) branches, as well. To build its power and prominence, it leaned heavily upon its comparative advantage in guerilla warfare and other unconventional tactics. Perhaps more importantly, it also harnessed the power of ideology. In order to propel its rise, the war had to be greater than the

“imposed war” against a neighboring state. Khomeini couched the war in universalist terms, and the U.S. featured centrally in this Manichean narrative.

Propaganda and education were central to the IRGC (and especially the Basij), and these would have ripple effects throughout society. The IRGC (Katzman 1993, 82) initially developed an education program in response to the low level of education possessed by its recruits. However, this provided an ideal platform for indoctrination. The core ideology of the IRGC was the lynchpin of its cohesion, and this focused on creating the ideal Islamic warrior, "warriors of Karbala." This ideology quickly spawned a wide range of publications, followed by think tanks and libraries. In the 1980's, the IRGC took its first steps toward becoming the central repository for the official narrative of the Islamic Republic. There was no way that an organization that made its bones by opposing the U.S. could fail to help institutionalize the U.S-Iranian conflict, and the IRGC was perhaps the most natural of its constituents.

A final point to consider, especially in light of the Tanker War with the U.S., was the value of the pyrrhic victory to the IRGC, an underappreciated *layer* of the conflict with the U.S. From a U.S. perspective, the IRGC lost its naval campaign against the America in almost every category of evaluation. Yet the Iranians claimed victory, and this victory boosted the power and prestige of the IRGC. Zatarain (2008, 87-88) argued that Iran's provocative "martyrdom" naval maneuvers in August 1987 were a "substitute for war, not a prelude to it." Iran recognized its own weakness in the face of U.S. combat power and chose to wage a largely symbolic campaign of resistance. This same logic of a "substitute for war" applied just as much to the brinksmanship of Iran's fast boat skirmishes, mine attacks, and isolated missile strikes. The symbolism of these attacks fed Khomeini's narrative and bolstered the legitimacy of his ideology, which had been damaged by the Iran-Contra scandal. It also played into Shiite traditions, which venerate the martyrdom of Hussein (Nasr 2006, 31-61), the son of the Imam Ali and grandson of Muhammad. Khomeini's teachings innovatively translated the concept of martyrdom in the face of

injustice to the modern world. The IRGC might have preferred a major victory against the U.S., but the mere fact that they faced their adversary without blinking, even while taking casualties, afforded them considerable honor in the eyes of the Iranian public. The prestige they gained from this episode was one more building block in turning the IRGC into a political force of its own.

Khomeini's (Khomeini 1989a, 14, 22, 45) last will and testament also addressed the IRGC. While they were discouraged from participating in politics, they were simultaneously admonished to uphold the values of the revolution, providing a less than subtle writ to oppose or defy political leaders who compromised those values. This dichotomy would play out over the next decade, because the IRGC would not content itself to simply return to its barracks following the Iran-Iraq War.

CENTCOM and the U.S. national security establishment

CENTCOM was born (starting as the RDJTF) at the beginning of the U.S. Iranian conflict. While its original purpose was to counter Soviet designs on the Middle East, even defending Iran if necessary, by the end of the 1980's, it became the central pillar of U.S. plans to counter Iranian influence in the Middle East. As outlined in the previous chapter, this started by building a regional security architecture based upon partnerships with Iran's hostile neighbors, a *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict that shaped the course of events for decades to come. In many ways, this *layer* helped make the U.S. tilt toward Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War inevitable, as these partners favored Iraq and feared Iran. CENTCOM also involved itself indirectly in the war by providing intelligence to Iraq and conducting Operation Staunch, which prevented the shipment of weapons to Iran.

In 1985, when General George Crist assumed command of CENTCOM (Dawson 2010, 7) (Hines 2000, 44-45), he began transitioning the organization away from its fixation on a Soviet attack of Iran. By 1987 (Woodward and Morgan 1987), even the U.S. public was questioning the validity of the assumptions that underpinned this fear. In official statements (SASC 1986, 616-618), Crist still framed CENTCOM's mission entirely in a Cold War context, but in practice, the command was intent on projecting U.S. power into region. To support this effort, Crist (Cordesman 1998) (Crist 2012, 169-172) pushed his own diplomatic offensive to build military-to-military ties throughout the Middle East. When revelations surrounding the Iran-Contra Scandal damaged broader U.S. relations with Arab countries (Crist 2012, 206), CENTCOM officials quietly continued their liaisons with little interruption, fully accepted by their partners. This likely fed both the growing influence of CENTCOM and the militarization of U.S. foreign policy in the region, as military channels supplanted diplomatic ones - another *layer* which would affect the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

As fears of the Soviet Union receded, it was replaced by the Iranian threat, a new raison d'etre for CENTCOM fueled by the insecurities of America's regional clients. This was a clear example of *displacement and conversion* at work, and this was accelerated by the Tanker War in 1987. CENTCOM did not ask for Operation Ernest Will, the escort of Kuwaiti tankers, but the ensuing naval combat pitted the new American command directly against its regional adversary in battle. Before this point, U.S. ships generally stayed out of the Persian Gulf. Now, along with aircraft and limited ground forces, they were there to stay. After the Iran-Iraq War, Crist's successor (Crist 2012, 372), General Norman Schwarzkopf, resisted pressure to draw down U.S. forces in the region, and the U.S. Navy even continued escorting tanker ships until 1990. The *displacement and conversion* of adversarial relationships from the Soviet Union to Iran was larger than CENTCOM itself, but the fledgling command became America's main effort against one of America's chief adversaries. CENTCOM's activities during the 1980's added *layers* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict because they fostered a new set of allies, interests, and obligations.

Additionally, CENTCOM was not the only member of the national security establishment engaged against Iran in the 1980's. Ronald Reagan (Crist 2012, 69-82) directed the development of a considerable intelligence effort pointed at Iran, and both the CIA and the Pentagon tasked secret units to penetrate and undermine the Iranian government and military. This included covert action designed to promote moderate factions within Iran, and it also included reconnaissance for potential military action, but Reagan stopped short of actively fomenting a counter-revolution. These operations fell outside the immediate responsibility of CENTCOM, but they furthered the institutionalization of the conflict with Iran, and as CENTCOM grew in influence, more of these sensitive programs came under its purview. One of the long-term institutional results of the Operation Eagle Claw failure in 1980 (Cogan 2003, 216) was that it eventually led to the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. This act removed the military service chiefs from the chain of command and greatly empowered the regional combatant commanders, including within CENTCOM. It also established Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC's) which consolidated control (or at least coordination) of all special operations and activities for a region under the combatant commander. Indirectly, through the hostage crisis and America's failed response, Iran helped create the conditions for the rise of CENTCOM three years before it was even established. Whether CENTCOM was a full-fledged constituent by the end of the decade is debatable, but it was certainly poised to become so.

The state of Israel

Israel was not yet a constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict in the 1980, still clinging to its doctrine of the periphery (the strategy of balancing against hostile Arab neighbors by building relationships with countries just outside the Arab world). Changes that took place over the course of

the decade, however, set the stage for Israel to become one of the most influential constituents within the conflict by the early 1990's.

With the onset of the Iran-Iraq War (Parsi 2007, 94,105), Israel immediately and openly sided with Iran, fearing any gains by its own adversary, Iraq. Three days after the invasion, in the midst of the hostage crisis, Menachem Begin (rather callously) called for the Carter administration to put aside its differences with Iran and support Iraq. In November 1980, Begin again declared his intention to support Iran, and although Carter did not budge in his enforcement of the embargo, Reagan later proved more pliable, turning a blind eye to Israeli weapon sales. By the end of 1981 (Samaan 2018, 74 - 77), U.S. intelligence estimated that Iran had sold at least $28 million in military equipment to Iran. Also (Parsi 2007, 107), the Israelis collaborated with Iran in a June 1981 air attack that destroyed Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor at Osirak. The Iranians provided intelligence regarding the facility, as well as advice from their previous, unsuccessful attempt, and they agreed to overflight and landing rights if needed.

This pattern continued through much of the war (Axworthy 2013, 207-209), and by 1983, Israel had sold an estimated $500 million in arms to Iran. Israel also provided technical assistance in helping Iran fabricate its own military spare parts, and Israeli operatives are known to have travelled to Iran as late as 1985. As previously discussed, Israel played a prominent role in instigating Reagan's ill-fated arm-for-hostages deal with Iran, and Israeli officials (Draper 1991, 151-154) were largely responsible for seeding the mythology of a "moderate" faction in Iran. Tellingly, although Israel (Parsi 2007, 125) did its own damage control in the wake of the scandal, Prime Minister Shamir still refused to stop arms transfers to Iran, claiming that these were an American idea to begin with. He also urged Reagan to continue building relations with Iran.

By 1987 (Alpher 1989, 159-164), Israelis were finally questioning the periphery doctrine. Israeli leaders stood firm through the Iran-Contra Scandal, but the public revelations brought a wave of

veterans and Iranian experts from within the national security establishment that began to openly question the underlying assumptions of the doctrine, subjecting it to public scrutiny and debate for the first time. Iran's support for Hezbollah's attacks in Lebanon was increasingly difficult to passively accept. Additionally, the Palestinian uprising in 1987, instead of uniting Arab opposition against Israel as it had in the past, drew muted support and suggestions that both sides should peacefully coexist. The Arab threat now looked less potent. Perhaps just as importantly, the U.S. had broken its neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War and was conducting combat actions against Iran in the Persian Gulf (Tanker War). It was problematic for Israel to openly side against its most valuable patron. Besides, America's growing regional power and budding alliances with the Arab Gulf States suggested ample opportunity for bandwagoning. All this said, the periphery doctrine was down but not out. Interestingly, even after Israel turned decisively against Iran in the 1990's, some authors (Alpher 2015, 105-123) (Samaan 2019) continued to cast about for new applications of the concept (highlighting the durability of institutions).

Why did the Israelis cling for so long to a dying doctrine during the 1980's? Some authors (such as Parsi 2007, 103) have pointed out that, despite its rhetoric, Iranian action against Israel was restrained in the 1980's. Besides, even in the halcyon days of the alliance with the Shah, Israel had endured Iran’s open disavowal of the relationship. Khomeini's cooperation with Israel, however, proved transactional at best, and the relationship was more lopsided than ever. Parsi (2007, 108) also pointed out that Israel attempted to manipulate Iran into becoming dependent on the relationship, but again, Iran proved more of an anchor than an asset. Alpher (2015, 80-85) argued that Israel suffered during the 1980's from "periphery nostalgia" which blinded them to the fundamental change which had taken place in Iran itself. During the arms-for-hostages episode, Israeli leaders were convinced that there were moderate elements in Iran who would inevitably triumph over Khomeini's radicals, and Alpher pointed out that even decades later, some Israeli leaders continued to believe exactly the same thing (underpinning their case for promoting regime change).

Ram (2009, 52-62) suggested that there was a deep psychological underpinning to Israel's attachment to Iran. The Israelis viewed themselves as vanguards of the Western modernization project in the Middle East. While more advanced than Iran, they viewed the Shah's quest for Western-style modernization and willingness to partner with Israel as a validation of the Israeli project. Much like Francis Fukuyama viewed liberalism as the "end of history" in the 1990's the Israelis viewed the modernization of the Middle East as *fait accompli*. Therefore, Khomeini's Islamist regime could only be seen as atavistic, a knee-jerk reaction against modernization that was doomed to fail. While Ram does not go this far, his description provides a compelling explanation for the pervasive belief that a moderate element that would ultimately triumph in Iran.

All of these explanations are consistent with the institutionalization of the periphery doctrine. However, by the end of the decade, this doctrine experienced the institutional mechanism of *exhaustion*. It had lost its utility and self-regenerating force. It was not dead yet, but it was ground to a rump. It was also fully ripe for the process of *displacement and conversion* to repurpose what remained. This would take place during the following decade, turning Iran into an enemy and making Israel one of the key constituencies in the U.S.-Iranian rivalry

U.S. Congress

Congress was not a full-fledged constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict during the 1980's. However, it was not entirely absent from the equation, and the events of the decade helped position it to make this jump in the 1990's. One example that foreshadowed the role congress would later play in stoking the conflict occurred in May 1979, after the fall of the Shah but before the hostage crisis. Republican Senator Jacob Javits (Kifner 1979) sponsored a bill, approved by the Senate, which

condemned Iran for its execution of some of the former Shah's leading officials and labelled the leaders of Iran's revolutionary courts as human rights observers. The move drew a furious reaction from many of Iran's emerging leaders, especially Ayatollah Khomeini, who labelled the U.S. as a "defeated and wounded snake." Iranian leaders delayed their acceptance of the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Tehran over the issue. James Bill (1988, 284) pointed out that this act undermined the Carter administration's efforts to foster ties with the new government by increasing the pressure faced by secular nationalist leaders fighting for their political lives in Iran. This controversy also spurred the Marxist Tudeh party (Milani 1994, 164), whose anti-American rhetoric would compete with Khomeini's in the coming months. This was an early manifestation of the human rights *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict that would appear in full force in the late 1990's, then again in 2009.

Neither was it insignificant that Iran played an outsized role in derailing the reelection and presidential legacy of Jimmy Carter. This is not quantifiable, but it certainly helped ensure that opposition to the Islamic Republic carried Democratic support, as well as Republican. Partisan politics featured more prominently in other aspects, though. Through the first half of the decade, Congressional Democrats served as a counterweight to Reagan's Middle East policy. Largely inspired by the Israeli lobby, they mounted considerable resistance (Goshko 1981) (Associated Press 1981) to weapons sales across the Muslim world, especially to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Congress, especially the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives did not broadly share Reagan's vision for a new Middle East security architecture (even though it was Carter who first initiated the project). Before ascribing too much of the credit to Israel, however, one should also note that Democrats successfully campaigned to tie Reagan's hands with respect to support for the Contra rebels in Nicaragua during the same period. Congress also resisted the U.S. "tilt" toward Iraq (Gibson 2010, 88, 150-151), admonishing Reagan for violating neutrality on multiple occasions, as early as 1982. In 1985, they attempted to return Iraq to the official list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The Iran-Contra Affair was the watershed moment that turned this political infighting decisively against Iran. The scandal unfolded just as the Democrats secured both houses of Congress in the 1986 elections, and it provided the newly empowered Democratic leadership with their first opportunity for an offensive against the Reagan administration. It may have been Reagan's support for the Contra rebels which most flagrantly violated U.S. laws and circumvented the authority of Congress, but it was the negotiations with Iran that offered political points to be scored.

Paules (2003, 108-113) described how Congressional leaders used the hearings as a platform for censuring and embarrassing the Reagan administration for its attempt to engage with Iran. The resulting narrative painted Iran as an irredeemably reactionary state that could not be negotiated with and would only exploit any openings it was afforded. Thus, when an Iraqi aircraft attacked the U.S.S. Stark that Spring, and the same Democrats (Zatarain 2008, 54) lambasted the Reagan administration for its reckless Middle East policy, Reagan's smartest course of action was to increase pressure on Iran. Congressional leaders could hardly advocate backing down in the face of threats and taunting from the same Iranian leaders they had just demonized. Naval operations in the Tanker War over the next year faced little opposition from Congress, and the establishment of a near-permanent U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf became a *fait accompli*. In the next decade, Congress would become a staunch advocate of U.S. military power in Middle East and a key constituent to the U.S. conflict with Iran.

Conclusion

The first decade of the U.S.-Iranian conflict is a story about events that drove institutional processes. It was never preordained that hostility between these two states should last for 40 years, with no end in sight. On the Iranian side, however, tactical decisions made for the expedience of the

moment altered the game in stepwise fashion, building momentum and weighing on future decisions – a classic case of path dependency. With the sudden fall of the Shah, the institutional processes of *displacement and conversion* began turning the U.S. into the adversary that both the clerical establishment and its associated security forces could rally against to consolidate their rule. Thus, patterns of action became entrenched as leaders habitually resorted to hostility to secure their own positions. Along the way, new developments and previously unrelated issues worked their way into the fabric of the conflict through the institutional process of *layering*. By the end of the first decade, this conflict had two distinct and identifiable constituencies in Iran. For an institution of animosity to develop, though, constituencies must crystallize on both sides.

Institutional processes worked heavily on the U.S. side of the conflict, as well, although in a slower and more subtle manner. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations leveraged the fall of the Shah to increase U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf and build a new security architecture, first at the expense of the Soviets, then in spite of waning Soviet power. CENTCOM was the vanguard of this effort, and though it lacked an ideological focus on Iran, it was shaped by the Iranian threat at almost every point from its inception. In terms of *displacement and conversion*, the U.S. exchanged Iraq for Iran as a new adversary, and then prepared to shift Cold War concerns to Iran as the Soviet Union teetered. Like Iran, the U.S. *layered* numerous issues onto the conflict, and after a brief but blatant military confrontation in the Persian Gulf, CENTCOM was poised to become a full-fledged constituent.

Not to be outdone, the U.S. Congress began to polarize itself against Iran, as well. Both sides of the aisle developed grievances against Iran, and the Iran-Contra Affair demonstrated that either side could utilize Iran effectively as a weapon of partisan warfare. Congress was not yet a constituent, but the patterns of action it developed in the 1980's would become entrenched by the next decade. Israel was the slowest to form as a constituency, but the 1980's witnessed the almost complete exhaustion of

its “periphery doctrine.” It would take only a nudge for Israel to turn against Iran with the same stubborn zeal that used to characterize its support.

The next three chapters will tell the story of how constituencies to the conflict internalized the developments of the 1980's and began to shape the course of events, instead of the other way around, eventually leading to a state of intractable conflict. The next chapter will begin with the administrations of U.S. President George H. W. Bush and the Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani.

CHAPTER 4 - THE SECOND DECADE, 1989-2000

The 1990's were a pivotal time for the U.S.-Iranian relationship. In spite of the turbulence of the previous decade, there were relatively few practical conflicts of interest that necessitated the perpetuation of hostilities between the countries. U.S. and Iranian forces did not significantly engage each other except for the attack on Khobar Towers, an important event, but also an outlier. Leaders on both sides openly recognized the value of developing a more cooperative relationship throughout the decade, and the mutual benefits of rapprochement appeared plainly to all. In short, conflict between the U.S. and Iran did not have to continue, and it did not have to get deeper.

Instead, this is exactly what happened. The ghost of the 1980's continued to haunt the relationship in new and sometimes revitalized form. This chapter will trace three time periods that each offered a different potential opening for improved relations. The first will be the presidency of George H.W. Bush, whose term coincided with major changes in the Islamic Republic, as well. The second will be the first term of President William J. Clinton, which coincided roughly with the second half of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in Iran. The third will cover the period from the election of Iranian President (Seyyed) Mohammad Khatami in 1997 to the 2000 presidential election in the U.S. For each of these periods, the chapter will cover the key events in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, followed by an institutional analysis of each, centered around the five key constituencies to the conflict that are under examination by this work.

Each of these time periods, both the U.S and Iran could have benefitted from a reduction in hostilities, but institutional forces were at work inhibiting positive change. In some cases, constituencies directly sabotaged an opening or conducted a hostile act to further its own interest. In other cases, the pursuit of separate priorities indirectly generated drag on the U.S.-Iranian relationship that simply made

rapprochement increasingly unlikely over time. Constituencies tied the hands of their own national leaders, limiting follow-through on any positive moves. The presence of constituencies on both sides of the conflict also meant that even when one side made overtures toward reconciliation, leaders on the other side were unable to follow suit. The spiral of conflict always had fuel to continue.

This chapter will highlight the operation of institutional processes, first *displacement and conversion*, in which a constituency's core priorities and focus shift from one adversary or threat to another, more current or immediate. *Layering* will be the most common throughout the chapter, in which events and issues that may not even be directly related to the conflict become enmeshed within the fabric of the relationship in ways that will not be quickly untangled. *Layering* fosters path dependency because otherwise separate issues develop new constraints in relation to each other. *Drift* is a long-term process that happens as important personalities central to a conflict change over time, and new leaders reinterpret the conflict they inherit within their own context. It often becomes evident only at key points after working silently long periods of time.

Goodwill Begets Goodwill…

The inauguration of President George H. W. Bush in 1989 marked a notable opportunity for change in the U.S.-Iranian relationship. In his inauguration address, Bush (1989) offered new "engagement," and while he did not mention Iran by name, he made a thinly veiled promise that, "There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Good will begets good will. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on." Ayatollah Khomeini was still alive at the time, and less than a month later, he issued his infamous *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, in an apparent

attempt to scuttle any future rapprochement with the U.S. The Bush administration (Hunter 2010, 45-46) was relatively restrained in its reaction, and it chose to wait and see, as Khomeini passed.

In Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (Axworthy 2013, 305-310) successfully captured the presidency in August 1989, a position which he himself had laid the groundwork to empower. Leading a country that had been ravaged, first by the revolution and then by eight years of war, Rafsanjani was eager to promote a pragmatist agenda that included building ties with the outside world. Internally, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had recently taken the position of Supreme Leader, following the passing of Khomeini, but Khamenei lacked both the religious credentials for the position and the cult of personality enjoyed by his predecessor. In short, Rafsanjani arguably held the most formal and informal political power that any popularly elected leader has enjoyed in the history of the Islamic Republic. Given the events of the previous decade, the situation could hardly have been more auspicious for a new start. Instead, the period marked by the Bush presidency failed to generate a "spiral of good faith," and it left the conflict more entrenched than before. Understanding why this played out the way it did requires an examination of the institutional story and the constituencies that began to develop during the previous decade.

What happened?

Less than two weeks after Rafsanjani's inauguration (Dowd 1989a), Bush stated, "we don't have to be hostile with Iran for the rest of our lives," and that a "clear signal" from Iran could reopen ties. He defined this term explicitly by the release of the remaining U.S. hostages. Only one day prior, Khamenei had denounced the U.S. and stated that, "No one in the Islamic Republic will hold talks with you." Ignoring this rhetoric, the U.S. began negotiating (Hunter 2010, 46-47) with Iranian officials indirectly

the same month through Italian diplomat Giandomenico Picco, who had been tasked by the U.N. Secretary General to serve as an intermediary for the hostage issue. Rafsanjani sent a message to Bush through Picco agreeing to assist with the release of hostages if the U.S. released 10 percent of the frozen assets and compensated the families of the Iran Air 655 victims. Instead of responding directly, Bush allowed Secretary of State James Baker to send a cool response through U.N. channels, feeling that anything more would be rewarding terrorism. Regardless, in November (Associated Press 1989) the Bush administration liquidated an escrow account that returned $567 million in frozen Iranian assets, while emphasizing publicly that this action was not specifically related to hostage negotiations. The U.S. government (Crist 2012, 384-385) also allowed Iran to open an interest section in the Pakistani embassy in Washington, D.C. The Iranians helped to secure the release of two U.S. hostages in April 1990. Hunter (2010, 47) pointed out critically that the Iranians received no reward for this assistance, but Bush had also been fairly explicit that a "clear signal" involved the release of *all* the hostages.

The U.S.-Iranian relationship was directly impacted after this point by a crucial development in world events, Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Iraq received considerable regional and international support during the Iran-Iraq War, mostly because of fears regarding Iran. With the war over, Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime became far less palatable to all concerned, and his crimes against the Kurds received greater attention. The U.S. Congress endeavored to impose new sanctions on Iraq, which they succeeded in doing in July 1990. The Bush administration (Hiro 1992, 94-95) initially strove to maintain Reagan's foreign policy gains with regard to the U.S.-Iraqi relationship, hoping to maintain leverage over Saddam Hussein. He fought Congressional sanctions, pushed for expanded aid, and continued intelligence sharing (Crist 2012, 384-385) with Iraq (Iran was aware of this through an Iraqi double agent).

A discussion of why Saddam Hussein chose to make his fateful decision is beyond the scope of this work (Yetiv 1992, 195-212), but in short, Iraq found itself with the most powerful army in the region, yet saddled with debt that his Kuwaiti creditors were not willing to forgive. Military action was far too tempting, and Saddam Hussein underestimated the resolve of the international community, especially the U.S. With the Cold War ending, Iraq could no longer play the superpowers off against each other. In response to Iraq's action (Crean 2015), the Bush administration rallied broad support from the United Nations and developed a coalition of 35 partners, deftly navigating a myriad of both domestic and international concerns. Exorcising demons from the Vietnam War (Freedman 2008, 234-253), the U.S. military conducted an unprecedented air campaign, followed on February 24, 1990 by a 100-hour ground war that roundly defeated Iraqi forces and ejected them from Kuwaiti soil.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait provided Iran with an interesting dilemma. On one hand, its most dangerous adversary had increased its strength by grabbing Kuwait's oil resources and extending its own share of Persian Gulf coastline. Rafsanjani (Hunter 2010, 49) described the prospect of leaving Iraq in Kuwait as "suicide" for Iran. However, Iran's hardliners were not prepared to condone foreign interference in the Persian Gulf. Khamenei (Hiro 1992, 181, 437) issued a *fatwa* against any U.S. deployment. Ultimately, Rafsanjani engineered a compromise position. Iran declared itself neutral in the conflict and played the situation to its own greatest advantage. It bolstered its diplomatic position, making inroads with Kuwaiti officials (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 323) and hosting talks (Hiro 1992, 366-367) between the Iraqi government and the Soviets in Tehran. It also (Krause 1991) selectively allowed trade with Iraq to cross its borders. However, in spite of public proclamations of neutrality and condemnation of U.S. actions, Iranian policies quietly favored the coalition and attempted to capitalize on the situation.

Iran allowed U.S. aircraft (Crist 2012, 386) access to Iranian airspace and established a special communication channel through the Swiss to deconflict air operations. It helped facilitate the return of several U.S. citizens who had been trapped in Kuwait and fled to Iran, and it hosted (Parsi 2017, 16-19) a large number of refugees from the conflict. In another odd turn of events (Wilkinson 1991), Saddam Hussein sent a large portion of his air force to Iran prior to the onset of hostilities, and Iran impounded 137 aircraft, refusing to return them to Iraq even after the war. Perhaps the greatest support that Iran lent the coalition was symbolic in nature. By accepting the U.N. resolution against Iraq (Hunter 2010, 48-49) and remaining neutral, this made it easier for Muslim countries to join the coalition, and it undercut Saddam Hussein's claim that he was fighting for Islam.

A final point of consideration with regard to Iran's policy toward the Gulf War involved less what Iran did and more what it refrained from doing. By his own accounts (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 472, 488-489), Bush was torn over the question of whether Saddam Hussein should have been allowed to stay in power. Allowing him to remain meant perpetuating a threat to Persian Gulf security, but his administration feared the disintegration of Iraq. Bush openly suggested that the Iraqi people should consider overthrowing Saddam, hoping that this might inspire a military coup that would replace the leader while leaving the structure of the Iraqi state intact. What transpired instead were uprisings by the Shia and Kurdish populations (Gerstenzang and Ross 1991), threatening Iraq's integrity and potentially opening a door for Islamic extremism. Iranian trained fighters (Takeyh 2009b, 136) (Indyk 1992, 73) had a hand in these uprisings, and Iran clearly could have pushed harder to topple Saddam Hussein. Why they refrained is a matter of debate, and it is possible that Iranian leaders also feared a breakup of Iraq, but either way, their decision benefitted U.S. policy.

The Bush administration's attitude toward Iran through this period was one of restraint. From the earliest days of the conflict (Hiro 1992, 181, 437), the U.S. reassured Tehran through the Swiss

embassy that it had no intention of keeping forces in the region. The Bush administration also generally ignored the rhetoric of Iran's hardliners and pursued a cooperative attitude, probably concerned that friction with Iran might detract from the delicate process of coalition-building. On the other hand, as pointed out by (Hunter 2010, 48-49), the U.S. refused to offer Iran any incentives unless it joined the coalition, which it could not do because of domestic political constraints. As the U.S. quickly gained the upper hand in the conflict, any willingness the Bush administration may have had to offer concessions to Iran dwindled. For the Bush administration ("War Over…" 1991), the decisive victory over Iraq allowed it to return its focus to pressuring Iran and Hezbollah over the hostage issue.

Also frustrating for Iran (Takeyh 2009b, 137), the Gulf Cooperation Council states plus Syria and Egypt put forth the Damascus Declaration in March calling for an "Arab Peace Force." Not only was Iran's cooperation discounted by Washington's coalition, but this new initiative (which included Iran's ally Syria) was clearly aligned against Tehran. Moreover, the momentum gained by U.S. military success fueled a greater ambition to shape the Middle East. Only days after completing the ground war, Bush (Friedman 1990) doubled down on his push for renewed peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Over the coming year, this path unfolded simultaneously with the hostage issue, further complicating the U.S. relationship with Iran. Regardless, in the immediate wake of the Gulf War, Bush (Meisler 1991) stated clearly, "We want better relations with Iran. We have no animosity."

For the Bush administration (Office of the Historian… 2020), efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace led to months of shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State James Baker, culminating in the Madrid Conference at the end of October 1991. This conference brought together a wide range of regional and international actors, and most significantly, it was the first such event to simultaneously include all parties (as dubbed by Washington) to the conflict. Iran was not invited to this event. The Leveretts (2013, 4, 109) argued that the Bush administration made a point of excluding Iran. Other authors, such

as Parsi (2017, 20) describe this less as a deliberate snub and more the product of an attitude by administration officials that Iran had no legitimate stake in the conflict and nothing to offer. Either way, getting the eventual participants involved was a significant undertaking in itself, and adding the Iranians to the equation might have undermined this effort. Iranian leaders reacted furiously to this conference (Ibrahim 2006, 63) (FBIS 1990) and quickly rallied a conference of their own in opposition to the peace talks with Israel, bringing 400 delegates from 45 countries (these largely represented Islamic fundamentalist groups and not the governments of their parent countries) to Tehran. They also offered subsidies to Palestinian groups willing to reject the peace process.

Pollack (2004, 254-255) argued that Iran was necessarily hostile to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, not only for ideological reasons but also geopolitical. If the Palestinian question were answered to Syria's satisfaction, then Iran's one Middle East ally would have little reason to continue cooperating with it, especially regarding Lebanon. Iran would have stood to lose its foothold in Middle East affairs. On the other hand, Parsi (2017, 20-21) viewed the situation differently. Iran had reduced its support for Hezbollah in the previous years. The Madrid conference included a variety of regional issues beyond just the peace process, and Iran's leaders expected to be included in all of these discussions. Had they been afforded this level of respect on the international stage, they might have played a more constructive role. The Bush administration's decision was therefore a "critical inflection point" in the U.S. Iranian relationship. Regardless of what Iran might have done otherwise, it now reversed course and increased its support for Hezbollah. It also began courting other rejectionist Palestinian groups across the Sunni-Shia divide, including Hamas, which it viewed as a natural ally.

On the hostage front, the Bush administration increased its efforts to secure the release of U.S. citizens through U.N. channels. While Baker was conducting shuttle diplomacy in support of the peace process, Picco (Crist 2012, 387-388) conducted a flurry of meetings in New York, Cyprus, Beirut, and

Damascus. Iranian officials facilitated these meetings but did not take part directly, maintaining that Iran was not involved in hostage taking. Picco's primary interlocutor was a shady representative of Hezbollah, who was probably Mughniyeh himself. Negotiations were complicated not only by the number of groups involved (Tyler 1991), but because the fate of the U.S. hostages was intertwined with those of other countries, including Israeli servicemembers who had been captured in Lebanon. Revelations that a group associate with Hezbollah had killed U.S. hostage Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins in 1989 also dampened the mood, as did the August 1991 (Ausseil 1995) assassination of former Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar in Germany, which was eventually linked directly to Iranian officials.

Regardless, the final U.S. hostages (Sciolino 1991, Dec 5) were released by the end of 1991. The Bush administration returned approximately $278 million in frozen Iranian funds from another escrow account, again denying any link between this money and the release of hostages. White House Spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater, acknowledged Iran's support and left open the possibility of goodwill, but added, " "Nevertheless, they are still a terrorist state and there's still no change in that." The New York Times described the Bush administration's position on Iran as "ambivalent," noting that they had also recently blocked the sale of British-made planes with American components and urged India not to build a nuclear power plant for Iran.

Ambivalent or not, the conditions for an improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations had not been more propitious since the fall of the Shah. Journalist Robin Wright (1992) authored an optimistic assessment with regard to rapprochement, citing Rafsanjani's pragmatic revival, the growth of cultural ties and affinity, and increases in business relationships. She pointed out that in spite of sanctions, the U.S. had become Iran's sixth largest trading partner. Exports to Iran had more than tripled between 1990 and the beginning of 1992 ($166.5 to $527 million, although still down from its peak under the

Shah of $26 billion). Oil imports from Iran jumped from $7 million to $265 million in the same period (although proceeds went into an escrow account per the terms of the sanctions).

What Wright could not have known was that even as her article went to print, the relationship was souring behind closed doors. Picco (Crist 2012, 388-389) met with National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft in April 1992. Scowcroft informed him that, "There will be no goodwill…" from the Bush administration. He cited the assassination of Bakhtiar, along with other terrorist acts including the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. Picco broke the news personally to Rafsanjani, who was furious and recommended to Picco that, "I think it is best if you leave Tehran very, very quickly. The news of what you told me will travel fast to other quarters, and they may decide not to let you go." Shortly afterward, Rafsanjani attempted one more outreach to the U.S. through a channel they had established with the Germans. The Bush administration was not interested.

Per Hunter (2010, 47), Rafsanjani's failed attempts to restore relations with the U.S. hurt him domestically and weakened his political position vis-a-vis his hardline opponents. Many authors have been quick to point out (perhaps rightfully so) that the Bush administration not only went back on its word but failed to seize a potential opportunity to establish a more cooperative relationship with Iran. Before assigning blame, however, there are some key points of to consider. First, Iran barely registered as a policy priority for Bush or his team. Upon taking office (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 305-306), Bush's concerns for the Persian Gulf centered entirely around energy security and a concern for U.S. hostages, so Iran was only visible in relation to these two issues. As his presidency unfolded, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, and the Middle East peace process took center stage.

James Baker (Baker and DeFrank 1995), in his entire memoir reflecting on his time as Bush's Secretary of State from 1989-1982, only mentioned Iran in passing, within the context of discussions over other issues. Additionally, as pointed out by Indyk (1992, 70), the Bush administration was flush

with success in in the foreign policy arena. It viewed the release of the hostages as another triumph of American power and will, not an overture that required a response. Moreover, from the perspective of the Bush administration (Litwak 2002, 185), Iran's words and actions were still contradictory. Even aside from the fiery rhetoric of its leaders, Iran's support for terrorism and opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process disqualified any gestures of goodwill. What these explanations fail to consider, though, is that institutional forces and processes were at work throughout this period, actively undermining steps toward peace and making a more cooperative relationship increasingly unlikely.

The institutional development of constituencies

The historical period coinciding with the George H. W. Bush presidency witnessed unprecedented changes in world history. The Fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War transformed the geopolitical landscape for the U.S., and the death of Khomeini ushered a new era in Iran. Iran needed reengagement with the outside world to rebuild its war-torn economy, and relations with the U.S. were the lynchpin to this effort. The U.S. benefitted from Iranian oil, burgeoning commercial opportunities, and Middle East stability (with Iran as a balancer against Iraqi ambition). In hindsight, this period seemed like a golden opportunity for a reset in the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Instead, both sides continued down a now familiar path of hostility, a testament to the power of institutional forces that had been building for the past decade. The conflict was shaping the habitus of four key constituencies that were now taking shape: Iran’s clerical establishment, the IRGC and clerical security forces, CENTCOM, and the state of Israel. New historical inputs were therefore translated into old patterns through the mechanisms of *displacement and conversion*, *layering*, and *drift*.

The death of Khomeini was a pivotal moment for the clerical establishment he had carried into power. It was well known that (Milani 1992, 175), though Ali Khamenei had Khomeini's blessing, and Khomeini had doctored the criteria for succession before his death, Khamenei lacked the religious credentials that would have made him eligible. Further, leaked footage (Radio Farda 2018) of the Assembly of Experts session that confirmed Khamenei as Supreme Leader showed that the body originally intended to appoint Khamenei as only a temporary caretaker for one year. Rafsanjani commandeered the proceedings and in, what Axworthy (2013, 308) described as a "classic Machiavellian move," ensured that Khamenei was installed as Khomeini's permanent replacement. This brought about a situation where Iran's Supreme Leader was (at least temporarily) beholden to its next President. Khamenei was beginning from a position of weakness and would have to claw his way to a position of strength, even if it meant undermining Rafsanjani to do it.

Pollack (2004, 251) pointed out that Khamenei's legitimacy derived fundamentally from Khomeini's legacy. This meant perpetuating Iran's opposition to Western imperialism, and especially the United States. Khamenei needed to cater to his own base of power, the clerical establishment and the IRGC. Bajoghli (2020) pointed out that the Islamic Republic had created a new set of elites in Iran, derived primarily from the clerics and their lower- and middle-class supporters who had been largely disenfranchised under the Shah. These individuals remembered what it was like to be marginalized, and they did not want to go back. Khomeini's ideology was the basis for their newfound status. By-and-large, they proved willing to rally around Khamenei, so the new Supreme leader could not afford any radical changes of direction. This was an example of *layering* where a new domestic struggle attached itself to the U.S.-Iranian relationship, while the previous layers remained as repertoires of rhetoric and action. It also demonstrated *drift* as the drama experienced a change in its cast of characters, each playing the same role, but with slightly different motivations than the previous.

Rafsanjani, although certainly a member of the clerical establishment and a founding father of Iran's revolution, was no longer a constituent to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. After personally helping end the Iran-Iraq War (Maloney 2015, 192-196, 205, 218, 223-227), he took the helm of a country ravaged by war and revolution. Nothing in his litany of speeches suggested love or respect for the U.S., but his strategy for reconstructing Iran required rebuilding ties with the outside world, and this became central to his own success. He also favored a generally liberal model of economics, selling off cumbersome state industries and empowering private actors. This alienated him from leftist clerical rivals who preferred state control of the economy. In many cases, these were hardliners in foreign policy, opposing engagement with the West as compromise with imperialism. It also alienated him from an up-and-coming generation of conservatives who were clawing their way up the social ladder under the rubric established by Khomeini and were loath to see his ideology changed. They viewed Rafsanjani as a corrupt politician, whose liberalism preyed upon the resources of the state for the benefit of his own supporters. For both groups, attacking Rafsanjani's engagement with the West was a convenient way to undermine him. With help from Khamenei in using the Council of Guardians to disqualify candidates, Rafsanjani sidelined the left from Iranian politics by 1992. However, this gamble depended on the ability to demonstrate the benefits of successful engagement with the West. With little to show for his engagement attempts, Rafsanjani's vulnerability to remaining hardliners increased, and his influence ebbed. The *layer* of domestic politics in Iran began increasingly undermining any hopes at reconciliation with the U.S.

Rafsanjani's (Maloney 2015, 239-243) reconstruction of Iran also added an additional economic *layer* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict by fostering a new elite within the clerical establishment. He was not above directly granting economic favors in return for political support, enriching himself and opening the door for all manner of corruption and embezzlement. Clerically controlled parastatal enterprises known as *bonyads* sprang up in the early days of the revolution to expropriate the wealth and assets of

the former Shah and his supporters, and they gained momentum as state industries were sold through privatization. Khomeini's Foundation for the Oppressed was one of the largest and most powerful of these organizations, falling under the direct control of Khamenei and providing him with an additional base of power. But as much as these actors may have owed Rafsanjani for their path to wealth, Iran's nouveau riche had little interest in engagement with the West. Isolation shielded domestic industries from foreign competition, giving clerical elites yet another incentive to undermine rapprochement, and the patronage networks they built gave them considerable clout with which to do it. An example of this would play out in 1993 and 1994 as *bonyads* disrupted Iranian agreements with both Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola.

During this time period, the IRGC and clerical security forces also displayed a vested interest in the U.S.-Iranian conflict. With the end of the Iran-Iraq War and their country in desperate need of reconstruction, the role of these forces should by all rights have diminished, but this is exactly what they were afraid of. The war had created a path (Amanat 2017, 868-871) to upward mobility and elite status within the Islamic Republic, through the revolutionary credentials gained by military service in the IRGC or Basij. Reacting to suggestions that the IRGC should be folded into the regular military (Alfoneh 2013, 26-27), the guard went on a political offensive, accusing Rafsanjani of selling out the revolution by ending the war. In September 1988, they convened a meeting of all IRGC commanders in Tehran's Azadi Stadium to "survey their future plans regarding the revolution." This sent a pointed message to Iran's rising leaders that they were a force to be reckoned with and they would not be sidelined. The action prompted the ailing Khomeini to admonish the IRGC in his will to stay out of politics (Khomeini 1989a, 45), but his wording suggested to many IRGC commanders that non-interference should be mutual. They were charged with defending the revolution, so upholding Khomeini's ideology gave them a raison d'etre, and this was rooted in anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism. Regardless, Khamenei needed the

support of the IRGC to shore up his own position. From this point forward, he became their patron, rarely siding against them in domestic struggles.

Rafsanjani took a different tack with IRGC. Recognizing his own inability to clip the IRGC's wings (Alfoneh 2013, 27, 169), he chose instead to bribe the organization by offering them a stake in Iran's economy. During the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC had already gained control of the Defense Industries Organization, an umbrella of public defense companies that provided the munitions and technologies required for Iran's war effort. At the end of the war, this organization had more than 65,000 employees. Instead of winding down its activities, it continued its operations and began to transfer its efforts to the production of high-tech items for the civilian market, competing with private industry in Iran. Rafsanjani (Maloney 2015, 205, 244) took this further, harnessing the IRGC's resources for the purposes of reconstruction, and it formed a conglomerate which later developed the acronym, GHORB. Not only did it control much of the infrastructure development within Iran, but it also dabbled in agriculture, mining, exports, and education. Additionally, Rafsanjani's privatization campaign afforded preferential treatment to veterans in selling shares of state enterprises, giving the network of past and present IRGC members a clear advantage. As with the clerics who subsumed their own share of the economy, the economic elites within the security establishment had little interest in opening Iran's economy to the West, benefitting both from isolation and the ability to muscle out competition. The IRGC's entrance into the economy demonstrated *layering*, as well as *drift*.

Economic interests notwithstanding, protecting and exporting the revolution were still the bread and butter for the IRGC and clerical security forces. This included the assassination of dissidents overseas. Iranian agents (probably associated with the MOIS) (O'Balance 1997, xix, 155-156) assassinated a Kurdish leader and two companions in Vienna in July 1989. In August 1991 they killed former Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris, and in September 1992, they killed three Iranian

Kurdish leaders along with a translator in Berlin. Takeyh (2009, 140-141) pointed out that France was one of the Western countries most likely to partner with Iran economically. However, a string of terrorist bombings in 1996 and the Lebanon bombing of French paratroopers in 1983 had already strained relations, so the Paris assassination was exactly the kind of press that Rafsanjani did not need.

Not only did this upset France, but it prompted Switzerland to temporarily close its diplomatic mission to Iran, disrupting the indirect consular connection that the U.S. maintained in Iran. Likewise, although the German government was more forgiving, the Berlin assassination stirred domestic resentment against Iran in Germany and invited U.S. pressure against the German government to limit ties with Iran. It is difficult to argue that these assassinations provided anything more than symbolic value to the regime – a victory for hardliners but a liability to the country. U.S. officials did not distinguish between Iran's political assassinations and terrorism, so these actions added *layers* to the terrorism aspect of the U.S.-Iranian conflict even while Rafsanjani was trying mend relations.

Iranian opposition to Israel also become an important *layer* in the relationship during this period, as well, and the IRGC spearheaded this process. Rafsanjani (Maloney 2015, 209-215) began a diplomatic offensive as soon as he came into office, attempting to rebuild Iran's influence throughout the Middle East, along with its ties to Europe and East Asia. Further, Iran (Pollack 2004, 253-254) sensed new opportunities as the former Soviet republics became independent. Rafsanjani made little substantive headway in these efforts, however, blocked primarily by the U.S. and its Gulf Arab partners. When U.S. pressure started to energize the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians, it threatened the relationship with Iran's one key external ally (Syria) and its last bastion of regional influence, and all this while excluding Iran from international discussions.

Iran’s support for Hezbollah declined in the late 1980’s, but for the IRGC, its foothold in Lebanon and the struggle against Israel constituted its most active and promising front for the export of the

revolution. Takeyh (2009, 165) commented about a remarkable consistency in Iran's opposition to Israel throughout the early years of the Islamic Republic. This was not entirely correct. Iran may have been consistent in its rhetorical denunciation of Israel, but as the previous chapter highlighted, this translated into very little action during the 1980's. Now the story would be different. Iranian leaders gained a discernable interest in disrupting Arab-Israeli peace, and the IRGC was again coming into its glory. In March 1992 (Axworthy 2013, 316) ("Death Toll…" 1992), a group associated with Hezbollah detonated a truck bomb outside the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing over thirty people and injuring hundreds more. While not directly an attack on the U.S., the Bush administration had invested a great deal of political capital in the peace process, so attacks against Israel were increasingly seen as attacks against U.S. interests. The Buenos Aires bombing occurred within approximately one month of the Bush administration's decision that "there will be no goodwill" (Crist 2012, 388). Not only did the the IRGC increase its support for Hezbollah, it also reached out to Palestinian rejectionist groups and other terrorist actors across the Sunni-Shia divide. Iranian opposition to Israel was now intrinsically linked to the U.S.-Iranian conflict. In short, even while Rafsanjani was attempting to rebuild relations with the West, both the clerical establishment and the IRGC steadily undermined this effort and jumped at every excuse to increase Iran’s international isolation.

Institutional processes were working just as hard on U.S. sided of the equation, as well, and CENTCOM came into its own as a prominent constituent to the conflict. As the Bush administration entered office (Crist 2012, 371-372), CENTCOM was still conducting escort operations for Kuwaiti tankers, which it would continue until April 1980. CENTCOM's new commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, garnered the support of the President Bush and successfully resisted pressure to draw down U.S. forces in the region, arguing this would unsettle Gulf State partners. He eventually cut the number of combatant warships assigned to the Gulf to five, but this was still five more than the U.S. operated in the Gulf before 1987. Upon taking command in 1988 (Hines 2000, 45-46), Schwarzkopf

engaged on yet another round of organization building within CENTCOM and external diplomatic engagement with Middle Eastern states. Schwarzkopf helped the command shed the last vestiges of its Cold War strategic orientation, and very presciently, he prepared for the possibility of a war with Iraq. In his visits with regional partners, though, Schwarzkopf found that, perhaps surprisingly, most leaders were more worried about the Iranian threat than any from Iraq, and this shaped CENTCOM's operating environment. Oddly, his own concerns were vindicated when Iraq's invasion of Kuwait occurred during a CENTCOM exercise that was designed to consider the very scenario.

The Gulf War, named Operation Desert Storm by the U.S.-led coalition that executed it, was a historic display of U.S. military and diplomatic power. President Bush found himself in a position of undisputed leadership within the region, and CENTCOM was his primary instrument for exercising this leadership. For the U.S. military (Dawson 2010, 8-10), Desert Storm was also the first major test of the Goldwater-Nichols reorganization of the Department of Defense. CENTCOM ran the war, utilizing its integral service components to manage various aspects of the campaign instead of relying on input from the military service chiefs in the Pentagon. While this model would be tweaked over time, CENTCOM effectively clawed out a new level of organizational autonomy. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. European and Pacific commands had vied with each other for position as the vanguards of U.S. military power. As the Soviet threat receded, CENTCOM was becoming the center of attention. Of course, because President Bush chose not to invade Iraq, Saddam Hussein continued to pose a threat, first and foremost to his own people. CENTCOM established a joint task forces to enforce no-fly zones in both southern and northern Iraq (the northern mission (Thompson 2011) was eventually ceded to European Command out of a base in Incirlik Turkey, but it received little press attention), and these missions continued until 2003. CENTCOM also developed a role in enforcing sanctions against Iraq.

For all of Bush's promises that American forces would not remain after it restored Kuwaiti sovereignty, CENTCOM had established a new footprint in the Middle East, and the administration was not about to squander its position of strength. Once reticent about allowing any U.S. personnel into their country, Kuwait now welcomed CENTCOM with open arms (Katzman 2006, 3-5), signing an extensive defense pact (still classified) which reportedly covered basing and facilities, joint military exercises, training of Kuwaiti forces and arms sales. By 1993, Kuwait contracted for over $3 billion in advanced U.S. weapons purchases. For the remainder of the decade (CRS 2019, 9-10), the U.S. based approximately 4,000 ground troops and 1,000 air personnel in country, along with aircraft and enough armor to outfit two combat brigades. Additionally, the Kuwaitis (Globalsecurity.org 2020) funded the construction of state-of-the-art training facilities, and the U.S. began (Jehl and Grace 1992) a frequent rotation of thousands of additional troops that would conduct short training deployments into country.

The story was similar in the rest of the region. Saudi Arabia (Hedges 2003) continued to host approximately 4,000 airmen, allowing the U.S. to patrol Iraqi airspace from its soil. The U.S. (Blanchard 2008, 9-10) also signed a classified defense cooperation agreement with Qatar in 1992. Qatar was not a major customer of advanced U.S. weapon systems during the 1990's (although this would change two decades later), but it invested $1 billion in the development the Al Udeid Air Base facility throughout the decade. Qatar essentially rented itself out as a premier command and logistical hub for U.S. forces in the region. For the 1990's (CRS 2017, 7), U.S. arms deliveries to the Middle East were higher than at any other period prior except for a spike in the 1970's at the height of the Shah's military buildup. In a classic example of *displacement and conversion*, the U.S. fully supplanted the position previously occupied by the Soviet Union as the arms supplier for the Middle East.

How then, did Iran figure into this equation? The CENTCOM staff commissioned a study by Pelletiere and Johnson (1992, v-16) assessing the U.S. geostrategic position in the Persian Gulf region.

The study was not authoritative and did not speak for the command, but in hindsight, it is readily apparent that the authors' assumptions and recommendations were well in-tune with the policymakers of the day. The study argued that a unipolar world favorable to the U.S. depended on energy security in the Middle East, but relying on balance of power politics would no longer suffice to protect the Gulf States (particularly Saudi Arabia) from their "recalcitrant enemies," Iraq and Iran. The U.S. should therefore act as the regional balancer and embrace the role of "policeman" of the Gulf. In a full-page, large-letter graphic, the paper explained that you cannot have "large scale military action without consensus." You cannot have "consensus without threat." In essence, the U.S. could not assume this leading role in Gulf Security until it was able to rally the Gulf Arab states around a common picture of the threats emanating from Iraq and Iran. Before the Gulf War, Arab states were trying to convince CENTCOM to worry about Iran. Now, CENTCOM would become a cheerleader for the consensus view. The U.S. already had a containment apparatus for Iraq in place. Naturally, it would need one for Iran.

CENTCOM was a rising constituent to the institutional conflict between the U.S. and Iran, but this was still subtle during the Bush years. The command necessarily fixated on Iraq for most of the period. It is unlikely that anybody from CENTCOM ever called White House and asked the Bush administration not to reciprocate "goodwill" to the Iranians for their help in freeing the hostages or cooperating with the coalition during the Gulf War. Instead, CENTCOM simply took the U.S. down a path (begun in the 1980's) that was mutually exclusive to rebuilding a constructive relationship with Iran. CENTCOM's prominence offered the Bush administration the opportunity to make America the hegemon of the Persian Gulf, at little apparent cost to U.S. taxpayers, and this was too good to pass up. The price was isolating Iran (which had been inviting isolation for over a decade) and Iraq (which had made itself odious to the international community in one fell swoop). This arrangement was advantageous to CENTCOM, so there was a strong incentive to use these two foes as a replacement (*displacement and conversion*) for the Soviets. CENTCOM, along with the broader U.S. national security

establishment (Axworthy 2013, 318-319), began to view Iran through a very similar lens of vilification and distrust that it had applied to the Soviet Union. This assumption that Iran had to be "up to no good" would color the assessments they provided to policymakers from this time forward and help to fuel the cycle of conflict.

The time period of the George H. W. Bush administration also saw the emergence of another constituent to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. As previously explained, Iran's opposition to Israel was now being *layered* into the U.S.-Iranian conflict, but the Israeli government became a constituent in its own rite. The groundwork had long been laid for Israel to turn against Iran, with the exhaustion of their "periphery doctrine." When this occurred after the June 1992 election of Yitzhak Rabin's Labor government, it happened very quickly. In a matter of a few short months, Israeli leaders who had previously been silent about Iran were pressing the U.S. government to tighten the screws on the Islamic Republic. Trita Parsi (2007) provided what is arguably the most comprehensive and widely cited description and explanation for this change. His work is worth considering on its own because his book tells an institutional story, in other terms.

For the first four decades of its existence (Parsi 2007, 140-151), the Israeli security establishment primarily concerned itself with existential threats arising externally from hostile neighbors. However, by the late 1980's internal Palestinian unrest was wearing on the Israeli population, and this came to a head in the early 1990's. During this same period, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait prompted changes in Israel's geostrategic position. The U.S. took the lead in defanging one of Israel's most potent adversaries, but in doing so, it cozied up to the region's Arab states and pressed Israel to sit on the sidelines, even in the face of missile attacks against its territory. Israeli relations with these Arab states had already been thawing, and the impending collapse of the Soviet Union was

prompting the Gulf States to abandon pan-Arabism and move closer to the U.S. The strategic threat against Israel was now at a historic low.

On the other hand, peace created its own problems. From Israel's perspective (Parsi 2007, 140-151), the U.S. was now realizing a vision for regional order which placed the Persian Gulf as the center and not itself. Perhaps most worryingly, the Bush administration was now determined to broker peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Bush's increasing opposition to Israeli settlements in the West Bank suggested that the U.S. was less willing than ever to favor the Israeli position. It was not that Yitzhak Shamir's hardline Likud government did not want an agreement with the Palestinians, but they had little faith in the talks, and they certainly did not want to negotiate from a position of weakness and risk being forced to compromise. Without external threats to blame, Israel could find little excuse to avoid being dragged to the Madrid talks, which began in the Fall of 1991. Israel's special relationship with the U.S., along with its own aspirations as a regional hegemon, appeared to be in jeopardy.

This difficult state of affairs (Parsi 2007, 158-171), along with domestic pressure to address the Palestinian issue, prompted a change in Israeli politics and swept Rabin's government to power in 1992. Rabin recognized that the PLO was growing weaker and was in danger of being displaced by hardline rivals, especially the Islamist Hamas, and he sensed an opportunity. Rabin's supporters also represented the camp that had long been questioning the logic of the periphery doctrine, increasingly since the mid-1980's. Iran had exhausted any utility as an ally to Israel, but now that Israel's more immediate threats had been addressed, it could be very useful as an adversary. By presenting Iran as an existential threat, Israel could garner U.S. sympathy and support, while also gaining space in the peace process by deflecting pressure to compromise. Further, by painting Iran as the bogeyman of the Middle East, Israel could help draw Arab countries toward its orbit and pull the regional center of gravity away from the Persian Gulf.

Constructing this narrative was easy to do. Israeli leaders (Parsi 2007, 158-171) simply pointed to Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and instead of downplaying anti-Israeli rhetoric, they took it at face value, using the fiery proclamations of Iran's clerical leaders as proof that the Islamic Republic was irreconcilably opposed to Israel and the West. Importantly, this shift was not based on any actual change of conditions with regard to Iran. The Iranian threat was strictly about future potential. Instead of having to demonstrate some new development, they could argue that it had always been there, lurking under the surface. This is the message that Rabin's supporters began to deliver to Washington, D.C. in the waning months of the Bush administration.

Israel's shift toward animosity with Iran was a strong example of *displacement and conversion*. As with most institutional change, it was years in the making, but once the underlying conditions aligned, it came together very quickly. Parsi (2007, 167) highlighted the common assertion that, "Israel needs an existential threat," pointing to institutional (although he did not use this word) aspects of Israel's founding and history. Even if the broad application of this statement to the state of Israel is an over-generalization, there were certainly institutions within 1990's Israel (notably the defense establishment) of which this was almost necessarily true. If nothing else, Israel had built its relationship with the U.S. on the premise that it was an embattled bastion of liberal democracy in a hostile neighborhood.

Assuming there is at least some merit to Israel's need for an existential threat, then when the Iraqi and larger Arab threat to Israel suddenly diminished, a replacement was all but inevitable. The periphery doctrine was relatively easy to invert, in theoretical terms, and Iran's own actions and rhetoric fed perfectly into this narrative. This *displacement and conversion* process also worked to the benefit of Israel's chief lobbying apparatus in the U.S., AIPAC. From its inception (Parsi, 2007, 183), AIPAC had focused on rallying U.S. support for Israel against its Arab foes. With Israel now making peace with the

Arab states, the organization was adrift. The pivot to Iran provided a new impetus and fresh life for AIPAC, which renewed its lobbying activities vigorously in support of Rabin.

Again, there was no smoking gun that pointed to the influence of constituencies in ensuring U.S.-Iranian hostility carried through the George H. W. Bush presidency, but these constituencies were clearly taking hold of the environment in which foreign policy operated for both the U.S. and Iran. Both the U.S. and Iran could have benefitted from a reduction in hostilities, and their leaders inclined in this direction. However, their freedom of movement was limited by the actions of domestic constituencies as home, as well as foreign constituencies abroad, who both soured the waters to pursue their own interest. The next section will demonstrate how this state of affairs expanded during the first term of the Clinton administration.

Dual Containment

For all the reasons previously described, the Bush administration's tokens of goodwill fell far short of what the Iranians, and particularly Rafsanjani, were expecting. Likewise, assistance with the hostages notwithstanding, the Iranians remained recalcitrant in their anti-American rhetoric and refusal to cooperate with U.S. designs for the Middle East. In spite of this stalemate, the door for potential cooperation was hardly closed. Rafsanjani was still early in his national reconstruction campaign, and the election of William J. Clinton to the U.S. presidency in 1992 was a surprise victory for the Democratic party, portending yet another opening for positive changes in the relationship between the U.S. and Iran. Again, the benefits of cooperation showed promise for both sides, but instead, each side hardened its position, adding and thickening *layers* of the institution of animosity.

What happened?

Bill Clinton (Clinton Presidential Center 2020) campaigned for the presidency in 1992 on a platform based almost entirely on economic and social issues. His predecessor, George H. W. Bush, had approval ratings close to 90 percent the year before, bolstered primarily by foreign policy successes that included the liberation of Kuwait and his administration's handling of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Clinton deftly avoided challenging Bush on his strengths, bypassing foreign policy issues where he could. Clinton's election created yet another possibility for improved relations between the U.S. and Iran, and his administration (Litwak 2002, 185) conducted its own review with few preconceived notions regarding hostility toward Iran. Parsi (2007, 163-164) pointed out that Clinton was actually surprised when Israeli leaders made their case for the Iranian threat; he had been expecting to hear about Iraq.

Inexorably tied to Israeli discomfort, however, were U.S. concerns over nuclear proliferation. The fall of the Soviet Union suggested a safer world in which nuclear weapons would no longer play a key role in international politics. North Korea, in particular, defied this prospect, and Iran (Mann 1991) had restarted its own nuclear program by 1991, if not earlier. A 1992 National Intelligence Estimate (Sciolino 1992) published after Clinton's election warned that Iran could have an atomic weapon by the year 2000. Nuclear proliferation was incompatible with the vision of globalization that the Clinton administration openly championed, and Iran's nuclear ambitions would add a new enduring *layer* to the conflict. Regardless, Clinton (Indyk 2009, 32, 216) preferred the idea of engagement with countries like Iran and North Korea, and he offered direct talks to Iran in 1993, although he was not willing to make concessions to bring them to the table. For Clinton, Iran would have to alter its behavior to see progress, and Iran expressed little interest in negotiating on these terms.

Senior State Department official Martin Indyk (who later served two terms as Ambassador to Israel) was the first to articulate a policy that the Clinton administration would fully adopt with regard to Iran. In a May 1993 address to a pro-Israeli think tank (Indyk 1993), he laid out a post-Cold War vision for the Middle East similar to that already under consideration by CENTCOM. In the wake of the Cold War, attempting to balance powers within the region was no longer advantageous. The U.S. could no longer afford to compartmentalize issues like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and Islamic extremism for the sake of maintaining the status quo. Instead the U.S. would take a leading role in developing a regional order conducive to security and progress for all. This meant using U.S. power to establish regional security and implement the "dual containment" of both Iraq and Iran, as the specific opponents of this order. Indyk's phrase, dual containment, was quickly adopted by the administration as official policy.

Another key label which entered the lexicon of U.S. policy early in the Clinton administration was the concept of "rogue states." U.S. national security advisor Anthony Lake (1994) advanced this idea in a *Foreign Affairs* article which envisioned a global "family of nations now committed to the pursuit of democratic institutions, the expansion of free markets, the peaceful settlement of conflict and the promotion of collective security." In contrast, he identified five nations, including Iraq and Iran, which he dubbed "backlash states" for choosing to stay outside this family and oppose its values. He noted that these states shared a common "siege mentality," which they used to justify the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Ultimately, Lake called upon the international community to assist the U.S. in isolating and deterring this group of states. Edwards (2014, 90) described how the term transitioned seamlessly into "rogue states," bifurcating the world into insiders and outsiders with regard to the American-led global order.

In terms of policy, however, dual containment was problematic, and Brzezinski, et al. (1997, 20) described this approach as "more a slogan than a strategy." Professor Gregory Gause (1994) was an early critic of dual containment, arguing (among other things) that what the policy offered in terms of clarity and simplicity was fully negated by its practical flaws. The U.S. would be tying itself to a fixed strategy in dynamic region, and it would be virtually impossible to unilaterally contain either actor, let alone both. Litwak (2002, 178-180) pointed out some additional pernicious effects, first of which was that the category of rogue states had no objective basis other than U.S. pronouncements, nor any standing in international law. This created friction with U.S. allies that chose to deal differently with these states on a limited or case-by-case basis. It also reduced flexibility because, "Once a state was relegated to this demonized category, it became very difficult politically to pursue any strategy other than comprehensive containment and isolation."

Further, the U.S. was largely alone in its efforts to contain Iran (Edwards 2014, 65), and unlike the case with Iraq, there were no U.N. Security Council Resolutions against the country. Complicating the issue (Indyk 2009, 167-170), the U.S. had now become Iran's largest customer for oil sales by 1994, which did not go unnoticed, especially when Clinton attempted to enlist European partners to pressure Iran. By Clinton's second term, the administration replaced dual containment in all but name with a policy that Brzezinski, et al. (1997, 20) described as "differentiated containment," or developing tailored solutions specifically for the containment of individual actors.

Unsurprisingly, Iran did not take well to the news that had been lumped together with Iraq and needed to be contained under any particular policy label. A Tehran news service (FBIS 1993, Jul 5) commented directly on the policy of dual containment, describing it as part of a U.S. campaign to "rule the world" by coercing other powerful countries into line with its wishes (It also reminded readers up front about the U.S. downing of Iran Air 655). Iranian leaders and press (FBIS 1994, June 7) began to

refer to U.S. containment efforts rhetorically as a "hostile" and "defeated" policy. Rafsanjani's primary strategy for defeating containment aligned naturally with his approach to reconstruction, a concerted push to rebuild economic ties with Europe and Asia. In pursuit of this goal, Iranian leaders (FBIS 1994, Jun 4) painted every successful diplomatic or economic transaction with a foreign country as a victory over U.S. policy. Indyk (2009, 167-170) described Iran as deliberately attempting to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its European allies, and Iran was successful by 1994 (FBIS 1994, Apr 18) at garnering multi-billion dollar credit deals with Germany and Japan, along with smaller ones from Switzerland, Austria, and Italy.

Iran had also embedded itself indirectly in the U.S. economy Indyk (2009, 167-170) by selling 24 percent of its oil exports to U.S. oil companies, who then resold it for profit on the international market. This was difficult for the Clinton administration to counter because U.S. business interests benefitted from the arrangement and argued that if the U.S. stepped out, another buyer would immediately reap the benefit at their expense. However, as Maloney (2015, 229-245) described, Iran's economic situation was plagued by a myriad of interconnected problems that were not easily fixed. For reasons beyond the scope of this work, Iran was poorly poised to either attract or benefit from foreign exchange or investment. A failed 1993 attempt at exchange rate unification erased any gains that average Iranians felt from the country's initial post-war recovery, exposing Iran's underlying problems, and Rafsanjani's reconstruction program began losing steam as the economy languished. U.S. pressure on Iran, exercised directly through sanctions and indirectly through influence over foreign partners, contributed to these woes, but it would be difficult to argue that the real source of Iran's economic problems was external.

For the first three years of the Clinton presidency, Iran did not conduct any known terrorist attacks directly against the U.S., but this was not the case with regard to Israel. These attacks were part-and-parcel with Iran’s opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. When the Madrid talks failed

to produce results (Aburish 1998, 249-258), the Israelis and Palestinians conducted secret talks in Oslo, Sweden, which culminated in an agreement between Israel and Palestinians, essentially trading land for peace and for the recognition of Israel. Arafat and Rabin (under mild coercion) famously shook hands on the White House lawn in September 1993. Iranian leaders reacted furiously, and Khamenei (FBIS 1993, Sep 16) condemned Arafat for treachery against the Palestinian cause. Sensing a threat to their strategic position, Iran went, as Parsi (2007, 175-176) described, from "cold peace to cold war."

Iran increased its support for both Hezbollah and Palestinian rejectionist groups like Hamas. It also targeted Israeli interests overseas. In June 1994 (UPI 1994), Thai officials arrested an Iranian agent plotting to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. In July 1994 (Sterman 2014), Hezbollah operatives conducted a second bombing in Argentina, this time killing 85 people and wounding hundreds more at a Jewish Center in Buenos Aires. Israeli intelligence linked the bombing directly to Iran. The next day (BBC 2018), in an act that would be later attributed to Iran, terrorists bombed a Panamanian passenger plane, killing 21, many of them Jews. Iran (FBIS 1994, Aug 24) (FBIS 1994, Aug 20) denied its involvement in terrorism, blaming the Buenos Aires bombing on a U.S.-Israeli plot to discredit Iran.

Following the November 1995 assassination of Rabin, Hezbollah and Hamas both stepped up their attacks against Israel (Schmemann 1996), prompting Prime Minister Shimon Peres to launch a fresh Israeli campaign into Lebanon. Collateral damage from this operation caused a public relations disaster which brought down his government and paved the way for the election of hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu in May 1996. Indyk (2009, 170-181) made the point that, while Iran was not directly responsible for all of the terrorist acts against Israel, its support to the groups involved and its influence over Syria implicated it in the entire chain of events which undermined negotiations. For the Clinton administration, "the enemies of peace had proved stronger than its proponents," and Iran specifically highlighted itself as a prominent enemy. Even without attacking the U.S. directly, Iran thickened the

institutional *layer* of terrorism that impeded any possibility of reconciliation. It also justified Israel's newfound animosity against it to both U.S. and Israeli audiences, further entangling Israeli interest within the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

In spite of this animosity, U.S. and Iranian interests briefly aligned in an oft-forgotten episode during Clinton's first term, the case of Bosnia. In 1991, the U.S. pushed for a U.N. arms embargo against all combatants in the Bosnian civil war, a move aimed primarily at limiting the aggression of the Serbs. However, by 1994, it appeared that the best way to achieve a peaceful settlement was by allowing the Bosnian Muslims and Croats to build parity first. At this point, the embargo was rarely enforced, and a number of countries, especially from the former Soviet Bloc were actively arming the Muslim side. Iran joined this group as well, sending IRGC advisors (Alfoneh 2013, 230-231). While they were not the primary supplier to the conflict (Cohen 1994), they also provided an estimated 1,500 tons of ammunition by the end of 1994. The Clinton administration (Jehl 1995), unable to lift the embargo it had previously imposed, deliberately chose to look the other way and not enforce it, a fact which they openly admitted in April 1995. Clinton did not endorse Iran's shipments to Bosnia, but he referred to them as, "understandable." This drew criticism, especially from Congress, because of fears that Iran would gain a foothold in Bosnia.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (1996) conducted an inquiry into the matter, essentially accusing the administration of conducting covert action without notifying Congress. Finding little hard evidence to fuel a scandal, the issue passed quickly from the headlines, but this episode illustrated a point. There was almost no public outcry in the U.S. over allowing the Russians or Polish to funnel arms into the conflict, but the Iranians were a lightning rod. Questions posed by the Senate Committee recalled the investigation into the Iran Contra Affair, almost a decade prior. If Clinton's officials had taken any more active a role than they did in allowing Iran's actions, they would likely have

found themselves in hot water. In short, cooperation with Iran was now next to impossible, even when interests aligned. The Iranians, for their part, were in no mood to collaborate, either. Iranian leaders (FBIS 1994, Feb 23) (FBIS 1995, Mar 9) harshly criticized U.S. policy in both the Balkans and elsewhere, including the Sudan, and they attempted to supplant the U.S.-led peace effort in Bosnia by creating their own channel for the resolution of the conflict.

In the midst of heightening tensions between the U.S. and Iran, Rafsanjani attempted an end run at engagement between the two countries. In March 1995 (Salpukas 1995), Iran awarded a major oil development project (the first of its kind to a foreign company) to the U.S. company, Conoco. This offer, which Slavin (2007, 183) dubbed an "exquisitely ill-timed move," drew immediate criticism from across the political spectrum in Washington, D.C. Clinton (Edwards 2013, 66-67), partly in an attempt to avoid ceding the political initiative to Congress with regard to Iran, responded by signing two executive orders (Clinton 1995a) (Clinton 1995b) which sealed existing loopholes with regard to U.S.-Iranian trade, effectively enacting an embargo. The first order opened with the finding that, "the actions and policies of the Government of Iran constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."

This language may have been useful in justifying the "national emergency" required to enact such an order, but such a hyperbolic statement clearly did not reflect the actual nature of any threat that Iran posed to the U.S. in 1995. The war of rhetoric had taken another step forward. Maloney (2015, 236) examined the dynamics of this move on the Iranian side. Getting the Iranian parliament to agree to such an unprecedented deal with the "Great Satan" cost Rafsanjani considerable political capital. His motivation could have been just as nefarious as his Washington accusers claimed; a ploy to unravel the U.S. pressure campaign from the inside out. It could also have been a practical move, as Iran clearly needed this foreign direct investment. It could even have been a genuine attempt to reset

relations with Washington by using economics to drive politics. Regardless of the motive, Rafsanjani's gambit backfired. The sanctions *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict thickened into an embargo, and Rafsanjani lost ground against his domestic rivals who took Clinton's response as proof of U.S. treachery and hostility.

Congress was not finished ratcheting up the pressure on Iran. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (Weiner 1996) Gingrich campaigned very publicly at the end of 1995 to earmark $18 million for of the intelligence budget for covert action against Iran, holding up the passage of the entire document over this issue. The money was intended for a campaign to "change the nature of the Government of Iran," an obvious affront to the 1981 Algiers Accord which pledged non-interference in Iran's internal affairs. The Clinton administration (Edwards 2013, 68) successfully changed the target of the campaign to Iran's policies as opposed to its actual government, but the insult had been deployed. Not to be outdone, the Iranian government (Weiner 1996) allocated $20 million to "counter the Great Satan." Congress then went on to pass the Iran Libya Sanctions Act (U.S. Congress 1996) which became law in August 1996 and created a mechanism for imposing U.S. sanctions on foreign companies that did business with Iran. This act was extremely controversial (Ibrahim 1996) with America's European partners, who considered them a violation of international law, however, Pollack (2004, 288) argued that this act was remarkably effective in frightening away international investment from Iran over the next several years. In effect, the U.S. had now unilaterally imposed international sanctions against Iran, constraining its options and further thickening this *layer* of institutional conflict.

In the midst of this controversy, terrorism again reared its head within the institutional development of the U.S.-Iranian conflict. On June 25, 1996 (Downing 1996, viii), a truck bomb detonated outside the Khobar Towers barracks facility in Dharhan, Saudi Arabia, which housed U.S. forces deployed in support of U.S. air operations over Iraq. The bomb killed 19 U.S. personnel and

wounded an estimated 500 more. The U.S. conducted an extensive investigation (Crist 2012, 405), led by the FBI, but it took several years of wrestling with the Saudi government to gain access to necessary evidence. Communications intercepts allegedly confirmed the involvement of high-level Iranian leaders and the approval of the Supreme Leader, but this was not publicly disclosed. The FBI investigation led to the indictment (in abstentia) (Grand Jury… 2001) of a Saudi Arabian Hezbollah cell, led by Ahmed al-Mughassil. This group (Riedel 2016) had trained with Lebanese Hezbollah under the tutelage of the IRGC, and al-Mughassil ran operations throughout the 1990's from an Iranian-controlled mosque in Damascus.

Intelligence officials later apprehended al-Mughassil in Beirut in August 2015 after travelling under alias on an Iranian passport from Tehran, where he had apparently been sheltered. It is possible (Soufan 2015) that Iran gave up al-Mughassil as some part of the nuclear negotiations with Washington, but they utility of hiding this fugitive may also have simply expired. In some ways, Iran's culpability in this attack became even more entrenched in the U.S.-Iranian conflict than it otherwise might because of the drawn-out way in which the case unfolded. Instead of an initial flurry of headlines, discussions and revelations continued for years.

One of effects of this convoluted process was the development of a dissenting view that Iran was not responsible for the attacks, and Saudi Arabia framed Iran in order to draw attention away from Al-Qaeda, whom it was unwilling to confront. Journalist Garreth Porter (2009a-e) has been one of the chief proponents of this theory, detailing a laundry list of irregularities with regard to the way the investigation was handled. Porter's work relied only on publicly available information and circumstantial evidence, though, and while some authors still question Iran's involvement, the official results of the investigation have yet to be disproven. A detailed analysis of this controversy is beyond the scope of this work, but what Porter's contributions strongly suggest is that the decision to conduct this attack

took place within the darkest recesses of factional politics of Iran. Rafsanjani himself may not have been privy to the bombing plans or may have dissented. What is completely clear is that operatives sponsored by the IRGC conducted extensive and detailed target surveillance of U.S. facilities including Khobar Towers prior to the incident. Even if Iranian leaders did not order the attack, so they certainly implicated themselves. A perverse effect of the extended controversy was that the Khobar Towers bombing would be rehashed for decades instead of sliding out of memory. Regardless of who ordered the attack, Iran would bear the blame every time the subject came up.

At face value, this time period reads like a laundry list of escalating grievances on both sides, but tit-for-tat explanations do not explain the cycle of hostility. Why did a Clinton administration initially bent on improving relations so quickly fall into a policy of deliberately isolating Iran? No particular event (or any development not already apparent at the end of the Bush administration) prompted this change, and while the U.S. made concessions to North Korea to curb its nuclear ambitions, it did no such thing for Iran. Why was cooperation with Iran over Bosnia such a non-starter, despite converging interest? How come, even though the U.S. was Iran's best customer for oil, a proposed investment deal for a U.S. corporation became a political lightening rod that led the President and Congress into a competition to see who could be tougher on Iran? On the Iranian side, why did clerical leaders fight Rafsanjani's economic engagement efforts at every turn and excoriate him for making the attempts? Why did the Iranians so viciously oppose the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, furthering their own isolation for dubious returns? Finally, why would Iranian leaders support the bombing of Khobar Towers but then forego any attempt to exploit the attack for strategic gain, almost as if it were an accident instead of a calculated move? These questions and inconsistencies only begin to make sense when one considers that another game was operating under the surface. Institutional forces were building constituencies with an increasing interest in perpetuating the conflict.

The institutional development of constituencies

As the decade progressed, relations between the U.S. and Iran continued to sour, driven increasingly by the actions of constituencies. Both Clinton and Rafsanjani openly preferred improved relations, but they found themselves constrained by powerful actors bent on shaping the environment toward continued hostility. In Iran, the clerical establishment, and especially the IRGC and clerical security forces, took a more active role in undermining the relationship. On the U.S. side, CENTCOM and the state of Israel continued the activities started under the Bush administration. Finally, this period saw the emergence of a powerful new constituency, the U.S. Congress.

Rafsanjani's overtures to the West, and especially the U.S., failed for a number of reasons, but resistance from the clerical establishment was chief among them. Radical leaders (Maloney 2015, 223-227) opposed Rafsanjani for ideological reasons, arguing that liberalism was selling out Iran and the principles of the revolution, opening Iran to predation by the West. These voices were largely muted by 1992, but they were by no means eliminated, and opponents were happy to see Rafsanjani's initiatives fail. Other clerics, as previously pointed out, had developed a financial stake in Iran's economy, and they preferred to leave barriers in place that shielded their own position, even at the expense of general prosperity. The constitution of the Islamic Republic (Economist Intelligence Unit 2006) enshrined prohibitions that prevented foreign ownership of Iranian assets, rules that greatly complicated foreign direct investment because the Iranian government could not offer terms to foreign companies that were favorable enough to offset the perceived risks of investing in Iran. The Iranians felt this most acutely in their oil industry (Stern 2007), as domestic companies lacked the capacity to develop Iran's oil infrastructure and maximize the country's earning potential.

Indyk (2009, 168-170) described the conservative-controlled Iranian parliament as an "unlikely ally" to Clinton administration attempts to isolate Iran. Even before the U.S. began implementing truly effective sanctions, the parliament stymied Rafsanjani's overtures to foreign investors. The Conoco deal was a notable exception and a temporary victory for Rafsanjani. The broad-based backlash from the U.S. government discredited Rafsanjani's already flagging attempts to use external engagement to support internal reconstruction. Much as U.S. democrats would blame Iran for the political demise of Jimmy Carter, Iranian leaders could point to the U.S. as the downfall of Rafsanjani and make the point that engagement was a recipe for failure. Iran's domestic politics again became more deeply *layered* into the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and the clerical establishment was stronger as a constituent than ever.

The IRGC and clerical security forces also did their part to help ensure that rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran was a non-starter. To begin with, they restarted Iran's nuclear program, and while Iranian leaders had declared that they had no intention of building nuclear weapons, the U.S. assessed that Iran was only a few short years from this capability. Parsi (2017, 17-18) argued that Iran actually started this effort toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War because it feared a renewed conflict with Iraq. Iranian leaders believed that their country would be unable to sustain another conventional war and would need weapons of mass destruction in order to prevail. However, the 1991 Gulf War effectively neutered Iraq's offensive capabilities and left Saddam Hussein internationally isolated. Iran's motivation (Pollack 2004, 259) for continuing the program after this point can only have been to increase its leverage against the U.S., and possibly Israel.

Additionally, the IRGC (Crist 2012, 396-397) began a conventional military buildup that approximately doubled its arms expenditures between 1990 and 1993. This included (Sale 2009, 173-174) Russian MiG-29 fighters, two hundred T-72 tanks, and three Kilo-class submarines. Most worryingly for the U.S., the IRGC expanded Iran's ballistic missile program, which its leaders viewed as

the lynchpin of the country's deterrence strategy against all external threats. Although Iran's nuclear program (Hunter 2010, 64-65) would not become the primary bone of contention between the U.S. and Iran for another decade (it was now a convenient justification for animosity but not yet the driver), Iran laid the groundwork for future hostility by adding the nuclear *layer* to the relationship. Adding ballistic missiles to the mix only exacerbated this effect.

More immediately damaging to the U.S.-Iranian relationship during this period, the IRGC and clerical security forces thickened the terrorism *layer*. Iran's worldwide plots against Israel did not incur U.S. retribution, but they solidified its association with terrorism. Iran was not a policy priority for Clinton (much like Bush before him), but the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was a symbol of American global leadership. By openly inserting itself as a spoiler in the process, Iran solidified its position as a "rogue state" in that emerging unipolar order, and the IRGC led the way in this effort. Crist (2012, 402-403) also pointed out that, while Iran's agents often kept a lower profile during this period, they were quite active behind the scenes. They concocted plots in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and they conducted detailed target surveillance of U.S. personnel and facilities in the region. Indyk (2009, 171) pointed out that they even initiated plans to surveil American officials within the continental U.S., although this apparently never came to fruition. Aside from the training and support that the IRGC provided to Bosnian Muslims (Risen and McManus 1996), they also made significant inroads into Sudan (Kempster 1993). Sudan became a crossroads for radical Islamic groups of all stripes (National Commission… 2004, 57), and while Iranian ties to Al-Qaeda have been debated, the IRGC shared close proximity and had friends in common with Bin Laden's group. This nexus was only one example of the murky relationships that would later fuel accusations (Stewart 2010) of Iranian support to Al-Qaeda.

The Khobar Towers bombing was the outlier, in that Iran sponsored a major attack which killed and wounded a large number of U.S. personnel. It was also different, because unlike the Lebanon

bombings, for which Iran's denials only thinly masked a gloating satisfaction, Iranian officials were more muted in their response. Porter (2009a-e) quoted Iranian officials who coolly explained that Iran had no motivation for such an act. Given the ongoing controversy over the sanctions imposed in 1995 and 1996, this may not have been entirely accurate. However, aside from a vindictive act of retribution, it is hard to imagine any calculated gain that Iranian leaders expected to achieve. Assuming that Iranians were responsible, this suggest that the right hand was operating independently of the left - a clear case of factionalism at work. This assessment fully supports the assertion of this dissertation that constituencies to a conflict will utilize any available opportunity to continue hostilities, even to the detriment of the states and societies from which they derive. By some accounts (Pollack 2004, 289), Khobar Towers drove the Clinton administration to the brink of military strikes against Iran by 1997, and it certainly hampered later efforts to engage with President Khatami.

The key Israeli role in pressing the U.S. government during the Clinton administration has already been explained. AIPAC carried the banner for Rabin, working both sides of the political aisle to beat the drum against Iran during the 1990's. Curiously, however, Parsi (2007, 188, 193-206) explained that Benjamin Netanyahu, who came to power in the Spring of 1996, ratcheted down Israeli hostility toward Iran. Based upon a complicated short-term interest calculation, Netanyahu decided that conflict with Iran was counterproductive to his domestic goals, which included dismantling the Oslo agreement with the Palestinians. With a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict off the table, Iran was happy to oblige Netanyahu and lower its own rhetoric and hostility. For the U.S.-Iranian relationship, however, the train had left the station. AIPAC still campaigned hard for the ILSA, which did not become law until two months after Netanyahu took office. In light of Khobar Towers, American leaders were little interested in the nuances of the dance between Israel and Iran, and neither Hezbollah nor Hamas stood down because Iranian and Israeli leaders took a breather. Netanyahu's decision was a tactical

choice, but it did not alter the underlying structural conditions for the U.S., Israel or Iran, and the Israeli *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship only thickened during this period.

CENTCOM's role in building institutional animosity during this period was again subtle, but it was significant, nonetheless. Cordesman (1997, 47-55) explained that the "peace dividend" from the end of the Cold War, along with Clinton's promises to focus on the domestic economy, led to significant reductions in military spending during the early 1990's. Faced with cuts in overall military end-strength, CENTCOM looked for ways to improve the efficiency of its crisis response capabilities. This resulted in a new strategy focused on early intervention which would apply the full spectrum of U.S. combat superiority to a conflict during the initial stages and require a less extensive buildup than the earlier Gulf War to conduct major campaigns. Paradoxically, the reduction in U.S. military power led to a bolstering of CENTCOM's forward presence instead of a draw-down. Troop levels on-land remained approximately constant, but these forces moved from a caretaker orientation to a combat mission, with improved equipment and longer logistical tails, including a small army of contractors. CENTCOM increased its offshore naval presence and air capabilities. In spite of Bush's promises during the buildup to the Gulf War that the U.S. had no intention of staying in the region, CENTCOM had established itself as a permanent fixture in Iran's neighborhood.

This increased presence did not go entirely unchallenged. Sunni militants, primarily under the direction of Al-Qaeda, conducted a series of attacks in the greater Middle East region throughout the decade, but Khobar Towers was the deadliest attack against U.S. forces. While the FBI was working with the Saudi government to determine responsibility for the attacks, the military and Congress conducted their own high-profile inquiries into the incident (Downing 1996) (House National Security Committee 1996), focused instead on the ability to defend against terrorist threats. Tellingly, these reports never questioned the underlying wisdom of a U.S. forward-deployed presence in the Persian Gulf. The focus

was on holding commanders responsible at all levels and pressing host nations to take a more active role in protecting U.S. forces. The combined result was to turn U.S. facilities across the region into virtual fortresses, a trend that would continue for decades to come. Not only had the U.S. moved into Iran's neighborhood, but it was establishing fortified garrisons.

Crist (2012, 396-400) highlighted an often-overlooked episode in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Stemming from a 1994 CENTCOM assessment which noted Iran's increasing conventional and missile capabilities in the Gulf, the command began an aggressive series of large-scale amphibious exercises throughout the region, lasting into 1995. Instead of having a deterring effect on Iran, the IRGC prepared for war by reinforcing their Persian Gulf islands with forward-deployed troops and both anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles. CENTCOM also noted that unlike previous occasions, the Iranians readied their missiles for firing by putting them on their launchers. Not wanting further escalation, Clinton downplayed the situation publicly, but Secretary of Defense William Perry quietly directed the command to develop plans for a war with Iran. Iran had *displaced* both the Soviet Union and Iraq as America's most likely adversary in a future war, and CENTCOM owed its place of prominence within the national security establishment to the Islamic Republic.

One of the highest-profile constituencies to the U.S.-Iranian conflict also emerged during this period, as well, the U.S. Congress. One could argue that the Israeli lobby bore responsibility for turning Congress against Iran during the Clinton administration, as AIPAC shifted focus. However, Congress introduced the Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act of 1992 (U.S. Congress 1992 - enacted with the Defense Authorization Act), aimed primarily at limiting Iran, before Rabin's election, and it was enshrined in law before Israel's pivot against Iran took effect. In fact, after the developments of the 1980's, Iran had no friends on either side of the political aisle, and U.S. lawmakers needed little prodding to pressure Iran.

Edwards (2014, 109-113) explained that a key shift took place in 1994, when Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the Fall of the Shah. Foreign policy, especially Iran, was in no way central to the Republican victory or their "contract with America." However, the up-and-coming generation of Republicans leaned against multilateralism and preferred assertions of U.S. strength and sovereignty on the world stage, and they favored hardline policies against "rogue states," in general. Relishing a newfound position of strength, congressional leaders such as House Speaker Newt Gingrich were keen on pressuring the Clinton administration at any convenient point of leverage. Iran proved to be an ideal bludgeon for the Republican Congress. The Islamic Republic had been so demonized in popular opinion that being "hard on Iran" carried no political downside, especially for Senators and Congressmen who were not directly responsible for American foreign policy, like the President. Being "soft on Iran" was a political liability, especially in light of AIPAC's efforts, so even for democrats, this was not the hill they were willing to die on.

Rafsanjani's bid to bring Conoco into the Iranian oil industry unfolded only weeks after the inauguration of this key power shift in Congress, and Edwards (2014, 65-69) argued that the ensuing series of actions against Iran were as much about domestic politics as they were about Iran's actions. By beating the drum against Iran, Gingrich was able to challenge Clinton for the initiative in foreign policy. The bills that Republicans proposed during this time would have limited Clinton's flexibility in dealing with a broad range of issues, beyond simply Iran, and they would have tread on the traditional prerogatives of the executive. Gingrich, on the other hand, had little to lose by pushing Iran too far, as Clinton would be left holding the bag. The Clinton administration's executive orders were an attempt to head this off and demonstrate that Congressional action was not required to address Iran. In a manner slightly reminiscent of Khomeini's competition with his leftist rivals in 1979 and 1980, both sides competed to be more radical in their stance toward Iran. Although Clinton clearly preferred a more measured and pragmatic approach, the Islamic Republic was not a policy priority worth squandering

political capital over. Just as in Iran, factional interests made productive engagement impossible, and constituencies to the conflict carried the day.

The conflict between the U.S. and Iran now had five living and active constituencies. All five developed clearly defined interests in continuing hostility between the U.S. and Iran and preventing any form of rapprochement. They all played a role, often taking turns for the lead, in crafting an environment unsuitable for peace. However, while constituencies may shape conditions, they do not necessarily control events. A surprise electoral outcome in Iran would provide a new opening to challenge the power of the constituencies to dictate outcomes.

Khatami - A New Hope?

If Clinton's 1992 victory was a welcome surprise to proponents of rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran, (Seyyed) Mohammad Khatami's election to the Iranian presidency in 1997 promised to be a game changer. A champion of democracy and freedom of the press, Khatami's rhetoric suggested that perhaps Iran's revolution had finally reached its long-awaited "Thermidorian phase" (Axworthy 2013, 306). While not conciliatory toward the U.S., per se, Khatami (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 128-134) advocated what he called a "dialogue of civilizations," in which Iran and the Western nations could work out their differences on the basis of reason and mutual respect. Most importantly, Khatami's victory awakened U.S. audiences to the fact that Iran's population, especially an up-and-coming generation of youth, did not necessarily share the radical vision of their hardline leaders. This development came at a time when the conflict with Iran was beginning to cost the U.S. financially and diplomatically, drawing domestic criticism (Litwak 2002, 186-187), and Iran's isolation was beginning to threaten the credibility of its own leaders with a restive populace. Yet for all this promise, the relationship between the U.S.

and Iran hardly improved, and constituencies to the conflict continued to block potential openings for reconciliation and complicate the relationship through various forms of *layering*.

What happened?

The 1997 Presidential election in Iran occurred a time of demographic transition. More than half of Iranians (Abdo and Lyons 2003, 82) were born after 1979 or were too young to remember the fall of the Shah. For many, the Iran-Iraq War and even Khomeini, himself, were only childhood memories. Iranian society had become far more educated and cosmopolitan since the revolution, and women began to slightly outnumber men in Iranian universities. Meanwhile (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 128-133), Rafsanjani's administration presided over a flagging economy and rising corruption that limited opportunities for most young Iranians, along with increased international isolation. By defeating his leftist rivals in the early 1990's (Abdo and Lyons 2003, 84), Rafsanjani made himself a captive to the conservative clerics that came to dominate the government, paving the way for domestic repression that caused popular resentment. Up to this point, politics in Iran had been a game that played out among the revolutionary elites who stage managed elections for predictable outcomes – "democracy" without popular representation. Przeworski (2003, 15) argued that (unbridled) democracy is a tool that provides a society (both citizens and leaders) with crucial information about itself - where values and preferences lie. Autocratic regimes lack this information, and by haltering Iran's democratic process for so long, the country's clerical leadership had left itself blind to the groundswell of discontent that swept Khatami to the presidency over conservative favorite Nateq-Nouri.

Khatami himself was an often-misinterpreted figure. Dubbed "Ayatollah Gorbachev" (Maloney 2015, 258) by supporters and opponents alike, both sides pinned their hopes and fears upon Iran's new

president. The country's budding reform movement (Hoveyda 2002, 208-209), still heavily suppressed by the state, adopted Khatami as their symbolic leader, hoping to reverse the autocratic nature of the regime in favor of genuine liberalism. Iran's hardliners quickly sensed a danger that Khatami could undermine the foundations of their own power. However, as pointed out by Abdo and Lyons (2003, 83-87), Khatami and his immediate supporters hailed from the same camp of leftist clerics that Rafsanjani and Khatami had sidelined in 1992. They were not anti-regime dissidents, but products of the revolution and supporters of both Khomeini and *valayat-e-faqih*. What Khatami advocated was a more moderate vision of the Islamic Republic; a change of behavior versus a change of nature. Although Khatami did push a liberal agenda (Majd 2008, 53), he invariably chose the path of reforming the Islamic Republic from within. As authors such as Hoveyda (2002, 207-210) argued, this made Khatami a disappointing champion for Iran's reformers. Regardless, the optimism surrounding Khatami in 1997 extended to foreign policy, and many observers expected a significant thaw in relations between the U.S. and Iran.

For the U.S., relations with Iran had reached their lowest point since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The Clinton administration and Congress were competing to isolate Iran, and revelations from the Khobar Towers investigation pointed increasingly toward Iranian culpability. In one narrative, Pollack (2004, 289-292) described the U.S. as having come to the brink of war with Iran, also mentioning a U.S. intelligence operation which deliberately "outed" Iranian agents worldwide in retaliation for Iranian surveillance. Interestingly, Litwak (2002, 186-187) challenged this narrative for the exact same time period, noting that there were a lot of commentators outside the U.S. government questioning Clinton's hardline approach against Iran, especially because sanctions had failed to generate international support. This disconnect lends support to the assertion that constituencies on the U.S. side had inflated the importance of the confronting Iran, but either way, Khatami's election reset the game.

Clinton (Mitchell 1997) openly welcomed Khatami's election describing the situation as "hopeful," but he was also cautious (Pollack 2004, 314), stipulating that any talks would have to be openly acknowledged. Sale (2009, 237-238) explained that, behind closed doors, both the Clinton administration and Saudi Arabia deliberately tamped down the investigation into Khobar Towers, the Saudis by ending their communication with the investigators and Clinton by personally ordering the National Security Documents related to the incident sealed. Indyk (2009, 217) pointed out that, if Khatami was truly keen on changing the behavior of the Iranian state, then Clinton was inclined to support those efforts at a "deliberate pace."

Khatami started his administration with a flurry of positive signals. The *New York Times* (1997) covered a press conference during the first week after his election and noted that the rhetoric he used was fairly standard for an Iranian leader, blaming the U.S. for the conflict between the two nations. However, Pollack (2004, 314-315) pointed out subtle differences that spoke volumes to his Iranian audience, such as denouncing terrorism and openly addressing the U.S. as the "great American people." In January 1998, Khatami gave an unprecedented interview to CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour (CNN 1998), where he offered a respectful and somewhat conciliatory message to the American people. He denounced all forms of violence and explained his concept for a "dialogue of civilizations," which should start outside of government channels through multi-layer interactions at the societal level. In the coming months (Pollack 2004, 317), he would back this up by blessing the travel of a number of academics and other non-official delegates to the U.S., where they began feeling out the U.S. position with regard to Iran.

Khamenei (Indyk 2009, 220-221) was not openly supportive, and he denounced any suggestion of talks with the U.S. a week after Khatami's interview, but he apparently acceded to the new change of direction. Iran started interdicting the Iraqi oil smuggling operations that it had previously allowed to

pass through its waters. Khatami's change in tone extended to Israel, as well. That same month, Yasser Arafat (Albright, et al. 2003, 320) showed U.S. officials a letter from Khatami that supported Palestinian participation in the peace process and recognized Israel's right to exist. In February 1998 (Pollack 2004, 318), one of Khatami's vice presidents gave the first interview by an official of the Islamic Republic to an Israeli news outlet, *Yediot Aharanot*.

The Clinton administration, in accordance with its measured approach, began a series of small but meaningful gestures to Iran. Clinton (Pollack 2004, 319-320) sent a message to Iran's leaders through the Swiss delegation, calling for an open dialogue with no preconditions. When Khatami did not respond, the administration assumed that hardliners must have interfered. Clinton then attempted to open a line of communication directly with Khatami, first through Saudi Arabia and later through Oman, hoping to bypass Iran's clerical establishment. Meanwhile, in October 1997 (Indyk 2009, 220, 222), the State Department took the symbolic step of adding the MEK to its list of foreign terrorist groups. In January 1998, responding to Khatami's interview, Clinton sent an Id al-Fitr message to the Iranian people. He also eased travel restrictions for Iranians, which facilitated Khatami's informal delegates. In February (Slavin 2007, 185), an American wrestling team competed in Iran. In May, the Clinton administration declined to impose secondary sanctions on French oil company Total for investing in Iran's oil industry, and further negotiations led to waivers for other European companies to do business with Iran.

In June (Albright, et al. 2003, 320), Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave a speech in which she called for a path to normalization between the U.S. and Iran and acknowledged that Iran had legitimate grievances. Iran's foreign minister (Sciolino 1998) directly rejected this offer, stating that the U.S. needed to end its "punitive" policies against Iran before any engagement could proceed. In September, Albright participated in a regional working group on Afghanistan, in which Iranians were also

a part. However, Iran deliberately avoided sending senior officials, and those in attendance avoided contact with the U.S. In December (Pollack 2004, 322), the State Department removed Iran from its list of major states involved in the production and trafficking of narcotics. While Clinton remained hopeful, U.S. overtures gained little positive traction in 1998.

Clinton's next push with regard to improving U.S.-Iranian relations (Indyk 2009, 224) came as Khatami faced mounting domestic pressure from hardline opponents. Hoping to bolster reformists, Clinton gave a speech in April 1999 that again acknowledged the legitimacy of historic Iranian grievances against the U.S., a quasi-apology for the Mossadegh coup. He also relaxed sanctions on a number of food, medical and humanitarian items. Shortly after this attempt, however, the specter of Khobar Towers again cast a shadow on the relationship (Pollack 2004, 324-325, 338). Saudi Arabia handed U.S. officials their completed case, including all of the evidence that decisively implicated Iran. Clinton was forced to address this issue but did not want to allow it to derail any progress in the rapprochement process. Clinton asked Omani officials to deliver a letter directly to Khatami, requesting that Iran take responsibility for the incident and prosecute those responsible. It is unlikely that this letter went straight to Khatami without additional clerical scrutiny. Iranian officials flatly denied the incident and responded by reminding the U.S. of Iran Air 655 and the money that Congress had recently appropriated for covert action against the Islamic Republic. The Summer of 1999 saw a major demonstration by the reform movement forcefully suppressed by hardliners in Iran, and Clinton's olive branch produced little. Iran stopped interdicting Iraqi oil smuggling, they continued support for Hezbollah (Albright, et al. 2003, 323), and their clandestine nuclear program remained a concern.

Clinton's last major effort toward rapprochement (Pollack 2004, 338-340) occurred in March 2000. Sensing an opening after the reformist victory in the February parliament elections, Albright gave a pivotal speech at the Iranian American Council in which she apologized for the 1953 coup, announced

the lifting of import bans on foodstuffs and carpets, and openly welcomed engagement. The speech fell flat, possibly in part because of its caveats which included a reference to "unelected hands," a poorly veiled dig at the power of the Supreme Leader. Ten days later, Khamanei lashed out at Albright and rejected the offer. That Fall, Clinton and Albright (Albright, et al. 2003, 325) made one more gesture to Iran, sitting through Khatami's speech at the U.N. The speech offered no new openings, and Iranian officials avoided engagement with the Americans. While Rafsanjani had suffered from a poor sense of timing in his attempt to push the Conoco deal in 1995, Clinton's officials had failed to read Iranian domestic politics. The zenith of Khatami's potential for affecting change in Iran had passed by the time Clinton made his full-court press.

Khatami's election put the Iranian clerical establishment off guard, giving him some room for maneuver at the beginning of his administration. He scored some initial gains (Pollack 2004, 313-314), securing key cabinet appointments and confronting the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) (which technically fell under his purview as president) over its controversial and repressive activities. He replaced its hardline leader, and while Khatami did not control the IRGC, he convinced Khamenei to replace its long-time commander, Mohsen Rezai. Khatami's primary focus (Hunter 2014, 162), though, was on opening the space for cultural and political expression. Iranians' newfound freedom led to a proliferation of new press and media outlets across the country, and the previously suppressed reform movement began to articulate alternate visions for the Islamic Republic.

It did not take long, however, for Iran's clerical establishment to recognize this threat to their grip on power. By late 1997 (Pollack 2004, 327-331), hardline factions started sending vigilantes to intimidate outspoken reformers, and by the Fall of 1998, the judiciary started arresting and prosecuting people associated with reform publications. In late 1998 and early 1999, vigilantes performed a series of "serial killings" against reformist leaders. In perhaps one of the greatest victories of the reform

movement, Khatami ordered investigations that linked the murders directly to the MOIS and to *fatwas* issued by leading clerics. The ensuing scandal led to a purge of the MOIS which cleared out 80 percent of personnel and put a halt on its nefarious activities (the IRGC would quickly fill this void). Unfortunately, the clerical establishment was not giving any ground.

In July 1999 (Maloney 2015, 285), the parliament passed a bill that clawed back Iranians' newly won press freedoms and shut down a popular newspaper. Reformers began a large-scale demonstration at Tehran University which sparked others across 18 cities. Iran's activists clearly hoped that Khatami would support their efforts, but they were bitterly disappointed. Abdo and Lyons (2003, 201-207) stressed that this sort of confrontation was never consistent with Khatami's approach to reform. He distanced himself from the demonstrations and stood by as Iran's security forces and their vigilante partners violently suppressed the uprising, killing and wounding an unknown number and arresting approximately 1,400 individuals. This marked a decisive turning point, both for the reform movement and for Khatami's presidency. Activism would continue, but it would operate within tightly constricted and ill-defined boundaries, that the hardliners would move periodically to exert their dominance. The February 2000 (Sachs 2000) election swept reformers to victory in parliament, but the Guardian Council (controlled by the Supreme leader) was more than prepared to block any attempt at meaningful change.

The U.S.-Iranian relationship played against the backdrop of this unprecedented power struggle in Iran, and the Clinton administration was well aware of these developments (Indyk 2014, 222-224), if not fully cognizant of the forces behind them. Clinton and Khatami both apparently desired some form of rapprochement, but this was not the priority for either administration. Albright (et al. 2003, 319-327) devoted nine pages of her memoir, which totaled over 500 pages, to this episode - more than James Baker from the Bush administration, but little more than an anecdote overall. A host of other domestic

and international issues consumed Clinton's attention throughout his second term, not the least of which were his own impeachment (Henneberger 1998) and a major bombing campaign against Iraq. On the other side, Khatami found himself in a political knife fight as soon as he was elected, and unlike Rafsanjani before him, he did not relish the contest. The battles he chose clearly reflected domestic priorities. The results of this apparently historic opportunity to rebuild relations were negligible.

Clinton and Khatami arguably tried harder during this period to reconcile than any other U.S. or Iranian leader at any other point in the 40-year history of the conflict. Both sides recognized the benefits of reduced hostilities and made historically significant conciliatory gestures. Instead of changing the dynamic between the U.S. and Iran, however, the events of the period further entrenched hostility. The conflict's constituencies had made the environment inhospitable for peace, and this only grew through the end of Clinton's presidency.

The institutional development of constituencies

It would be convenient for the argument of this dissertation if each of the five identified constituencies to the U.S.-Iranian conflict had specifically and deliberately torpedoed rapprochement during this time period. Instead, it appears that the hopes suggested by Khatami's election largely became collateral damage from domestic constituencies fighting for their interests on both sides. This indirect manner of operation is often characteristic of institutional processes working behind the scenes. Each constituency was active during this period, and the decisions and events that occurred throughout this episode had enduring consequences for the future path dependency of the conflict. The process of *layering* continued unabated throughout.

Of the constituencies to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, Iran's clerical establishment was the most open and active in undermining any positive momentum. Recognizing that the tides of public opinion had changed, and assuming that Khatami was loyal to Khomeini's vision for Iran, Khamenei initially gave Khatami some room to run. This did not mean that he endorsed Khatami's "dialogue of civilizations." The only changes to Khamenei's rhetoric against the U.S. were variations in frequency. Abdo and Lyons (2003, 265) cited an especially pointed editorial from a hardline newspaper in 1999 stating that, in their translation, "to give up the struggle against America was to give up everything." Accordingly, Khamenei and his supporters denounced every overture that the Clinton administration made, except the ones they ignored. Iranian officials were clearly prohibited from engaging with U.S. counterparts. Iran's foreign minister explained in 1998 (Sciolino 1998) that his country would not hold talks with the U.S. until America dropped all of its "punitive" measures against Iran. In fact, by the time Clinton issued his March 2000 apology, the U.S. had relaxed most of its sanctions, in practice if not in principle. The U.S. was out of the Iranian oil market, but Iran had other investors available. It is difficult to imagine how much more the Clinton administration could reasonably have done or how much it would have taken to pique Khamenei's interest. Aside from temporarily interdicting the flow of smuggled Iraqi oil, the Iranians simply made no effort.

A likely explanation for Iran's turn from open hostility to passive aggressiveness was that the clerical establishment's attention was focused on the domestic struggle. As media outlets blossomed (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 135-140), it quickly became apparent that the very foundations of Khomeini's vision were being called into question – a clear threat to the power and privilege this class had attained. Violence and repression were the first ports of call, but the clerics could not solve their legitimacy problem this way, especially as the population had developed a newfound taste for public accountability. The next best option was to discredit Khatami at every turn. In one particular area, the economy, Khatami made himself vulnerable. His lack of focus and expertise in this area meant that the

economic doldrums of the Rafsanjani era would haunt his administration, as well. Just as importantly, though, undermining Khatami's "dialogue of civilizations" was a cornerstone of their strategy. It was less important to hardliners whether the U.S. and Iran ever sat down and talked than it was to ensure that Khatami could not take credit for it. Eventually, the hardline camp would develop an alternative political vision to actively compete with the reform movement (leading to the rise of Ahmadinejad), but until that time, Khatami could not be allowed any gains. The U.S.-Iranian relationship had become a captive of internal Iranian politics, and this added a *layer* to the domestic political *layers* already in place.

The IRGC were less visible in the U.S.-Iranian conflict during this period, but institutional forces were still at work. First, the IRGC continued Iran's nuclear program (Albright, et al. 2003), along with ballistic missile research and development. With Iraq held at bay by the U.S., these could only be explained at this juncture by fear and animosity directed toward America and possibly Israel (though the conflict with Israel had ebbed slightly during this period). Second, the Basij element (Alfoneh 2015) of the IRGC developed a role in domestic repression. This did not directly concern the U.S., but as American interest in Iran's human rights record increased, the Basijis' role as thugs of the regime became more disturbing. Third, as many as 70 percent of the IRGC (Gheissari and Nasr 2006, 131, 136-137) had voted for Khatami, which greatly disturbed the Supreme Leader. Khamenei began to insulate the IRGC from reformist influence by installing like-minded leadership, increasing its funding and support, and giving its leaders and veterans influential government positions. He also intensified (Bajoghli 2020) (Golkar 2010, 2) the ideological indoctrination within the ranks. This ideology was based on Khomeini's vehement anti-Americanism, so this had the effect of further radicalizing the IRGC. Khamenei especially focused on indoctrinating the Basij, which because of their large numbers and penetration of Iranian society was positioned to produce an up-and-coming generation of regime loyalists. The IRGC also developed the media infrastructure to project its ideology into society, as well. Also worth noting, the IRGC benefitted from the 1999 purge (Pollack 2004, 331) of the MOIS and largely

usurped its internal security role, further increasing IRGC influence. Essentially, while the IRGC may have been less confrontational toward the U.S. during this period, it also gained in increased stake in ensuring that the U.S. and Iran never became friends.

The U.S. Congress continued its animosity toward Iran throughout the period, but the real focus of Congressional Republicans in both houses was on scoring points at the expense of the Democratic President, Bill Clinton. After Clinton's reelection in 1996 (Edwards 2014, 73), he was no longer as vulnerable to public accusations of being "soft on Iran." However, just as the fight of ILSA had been a fight for control of foreign policy prerogatives within the U.S. government, the Republican-controlled Congress continued to press its power struggle. In 1998 , Congress passed the Iran Missile Proliferation Act (IMPA) (U.S. Congress 1998) which would have mandated U.S. sanctions against foreign companies deemed to have contributed to Iran's ballistic missile program, also requiring regular reports from the Executive Branch back to the Legislature on compliance with this issue. Clinton vetoed the bill, arguing that it tied his hands in foreign policy (Schmitt 1998), but in order to protect against a Congressional override (New York Times 1998), he sanctioned nine Russian companies who had been accused of complicity in this program. While Republicans provided the primary impetus for the IMPA, Clinton's veto would not have been in danger of an override if Democrats in both houses had not been keen on pressuring Iran, as well.

Even as Clinton pressed his rapprochement efforts, though, Congress kept attempting to tighten the screws on Iran. This pressure is most likely why Clinton felt compelled to address the Khobar Towers incident at such an inopportune time in 1999. There were certainly Iran hawks in his own administration, such as F.B.I. Director Luis Freeh (Walsh 2001), but their power to twist his arm came indirectly through links to Congress. The legislative wrangling eventually led to the Iran Non-Proliferation Act of 2000 (Edwards 2014, 71-72) which Clinton signed only because it left the President

the power to choose if and when it would be enforced. It is also entirely possible that pressure from Congress regarding Iran would have been event greater during this period, except that the impeachment proceedings (Henneberger 1998) from late 1998 into early 1999 consumed a great deal of lawmakers' focus. The Republicans temporarily found a more effective bludgeon than Iran, and their impeachment effort expended a large amount of political capital. Just as domestic politics in Iran bled into the U.S.-Iranian relationship, so did U.S. internal politics. This steady drumbeat of sanctions and the threat of more sanctions developed a habitual pattern of action for Congress, and it thickened the sanctions *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

Like the IRGC on the Iranian side, CENTCOM's role in stoking the U.S.-Iran conflict was muted, but animosity continued to build. Prior to Khatami's election (Crist 2012, 407-409), the U.S. was ramping up toward military strikes in retaliation for Khobar Towers. Newly appointed CENTCOM commander General Anthony Zinni began developing yet another new war plan for Iran in 1997 with the end goal of regime change. The plan took two years to complete, so its drafting occurred simultaneously with Clinton's attempts to engage Iran. CENTCOM's most important kinetic action (Hines 2000, 48) during this period targeted Iraq, not Iran. The late 1998 air campaign, Desert Fox, retaliated for Saddam Hussein's non-compliance with the inspections regime. Again, however, U.S. aircraft were conducting military strikes on targets within driving distance of Iran's border, an indirect but unmistakable threat. Additionally, in 1999, CENTCOM assumed responsibility for five of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. Even as Iran was attempting to make diplomatic and economic inroads with its Asian neighbors, America's most forward-leaning and diplomatically engaged combatant command was also extending its reach and competing for the same ground.

Morrissey (2017, 10, 31, 36-39) describes how, especially during the 1990's, CENTCOM leaders began articulating their vision for a U.S. regional strategy in terms of neoliberal tropes, using the

expansionist language of globalism and capitalism. CENTCOM envisioned itself as a global force for protecting and expanding both democratic values and free markets, offering regional stability as an underpinning for global prosperity (a thin veil for securing the oil markets). The U.S. was indispensable in this role, first because of its ability to intervene on behalf of these objectives, but also because the U.S. alone could mediate among a host of countries that had difficulty cooperating amongst themselves. In proffering this vision, CENTCOM was aligning itself almost perfectly with the neoliberal ambitions that would largely characterize the next presidential administration in the U.S. The Iranians may not have realized it yet, but neoliberalism was a new *layer* that was being added to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

Israel's role in the U.S.-Iran conflict was more subtle during this period, as well, but it still exerted influence. Israel's détente with Iran lasted for about a year. Per Parsi (2007, 199, 202-210, 216), Netanyahu felt that, during his initial months in office, confrontation with Iran was counterproductive. He was also concerned that the U.S. might begin a direct dialogue with Iran, as Clinton was inclined to do. If Israel was hostile to Iran when this happened, then it would be cut out of the process and its influence with Washington reduced. However, this temporary thaw with Iran produced few returns for Israel. By the time Khatami came into office and U.S. hopes for a relationship with Iran increased, Israel was already leaning back toward hostility. Khatami's new rhetorical stance may have slowed the process, but Iran's actual behavior changed little, and Israeli leaders fixated increasingly on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The concerns they shared with U.S. leaders reflected directly in the legislation crafted by Congress (the IMPA and the Iran Non-Proliferation Act of 2000) (Smith 2000, 127-128) and Clinton's sanctions against Russian companies for sharing missile technology.

Ultimately (Parsi 2007, 216-219), Israeli leaders became cynical about Iran's true capacity for rapprochement with the U.S. and stopped worrying as much about the possibility of U.S.-Iranian

engagement. Incoming Prime Minister Ehud Barak hedged his bets in 1999 by shifting Israel's rhetoric regarding Iran slightly, reducing them from an "enemy" to merely a "threat," but isolating Iran remained in Israel's strategic interest. Two other points are worth considering in examining Israel as a constituent. First, Israeli actions (Parsi 2007, 210) were not always consistent in pursuit of this isolation. Even while AIPAC called for stronger sanctions, some Israeli companies continued to do business with Iranian counterparts in the same industries. Second, AIPAC (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007) demonstrated institutional qualities of its own, remaining very consistent throughout this period in lobbying against Iran regardless of shifts in Israeli policy.

In addition to the evolution of constituencies, Khatami's presidency added another completely different *layer* to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, the issue of human rights. Prior to his election, U.S. audiences had generally viewed Iranians monolithically as ideological fanatics. Now they began to see a pro-Western, democratically inclined population pushing back against an oppressive and reactionary government. This fit the ready-made lens already in place by the Clinton administration as it championed globalism, political and economic liberalism, and human rights. As with any lens, it oversimplified the complex political situation in Iran, and in this case, it bifurcated good and evil according U.S. standards.

Albright (et al. 2003 324) explained in her memoirs that Iran was a challenging policy case because, "both the totalitarians and the democrats were present at the same time." It was tricky to reach out to one while holding the other at bay. Clinton further exemplified this view (Slavin 2007, 190) by attempting to dialogue with Khatami directly (through the Omanis) and bypass the clerical establishment. The underlying assumption was that Khatami was a U.S. ally, trapped by the forces of repression. Much like Ronald Reagan in the previous decade who chased in vain after Iran's elusive pro-Western "moderates," Clinton viewed Iran's population and their besieged president as allies against an

odious regime. The conceptual problems with viewing Iran in this way warrant a dissertation of their own, but for the purposes of this work, there were some very practical consequences for the entrenchment of conflict.

The chief consequence of introducing a human rights *layer* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict was that it encouraged U.S. leaders, along with a host of Western organizations and interests, to attempt to meddle in Iranian politics. Most of this meddling would be primarily rhetorical in nature, challenging the legitimacy of Iran's rulers, or as Clinton attempted to do, bolstering the position of reform leaders in Iran. As with Clinton's failed attempts, the U.S. would never be successful in manipulating outcomes in Iranian politics. Unfortunately, by viewing Iran through the Manichean lens of "democrats" versus "totalitarians," U.S. leaders constructed a picture of the clerical regime as inherently brittle. Khamenei's reactionary base was clinging to power through repression against a population ready for liberal change - a doomed fight against Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." This idea that the Iran's hardline regime was waiting to collapse under its own weight would tempt future policymakers to try and expedite the process, usually by increasing pressure on Iran. Another logical consequence of adding this *layer* to the conflict was that the menu of grievances for Iran hawks within the U.S. increased. If Iran's nuclear program or its support for terrorism did not seem bad enough to justify hostility at a given moment, constituents to the conflict could cite all manners of domestic repression and paint themselves as champions of an oppressed people. This would play out over the next two decades.

What this period highlighted most in institutional terms was that fully formed constituencies do not even need to consciously try in order to undermine rapprochement. Once a conflict becomes interwoven into the habitus of a social group, domestic struggles that should have nothing to do with the international conflict will inevitably drag on the conflict in question. This drag serves as an anchor capable of stymieing any possibility of building momentum toward reconciliation.

Conclusion

This period of time, roughly coinciding with the 1990's, demonstrated a tremendous amount of entrenchment of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The 1980's laid a foundation for enduring conflict, and the events of the decade *layered* a myriad of issues into the relationship that constrained leader action on both sides and generated path dependency. This formed the foundations for a set of constituencies to the conflict that emerged in full form on both sides in the 1990's. Whereas during the 1980's, it was events and issues shaping constituencies, in the 1990's the constituencies began to actively shape the decision space in which national leaders would have to choose their paths. On the Iranian side, the clerical establishment and the IRGC doubled down on Khomeini's radical vision as the basis for their own legitimacy. They discovered economic benefits to Iran's isolation from the world, and they began to envision successful foreign policy in negative terms, as anything which spoiled U.S. plans for the region. On the U.S. side, CENTCOM emerged as the flagship of the U.S. national security establishment, based first and foremost on the premise of an Iranian threat that filled a vacuum after the fall of the Soviet Union. The U.S. Congress discovered that opposing Iran was a popular and low-cost platform for both sides of the aisle, and it could also be an effective partisan bludgeon against the Executive Branch. Finally, Israel joined the fray by decisively opposing Iran, and they began actively influencing U.S. politics in this direction, setting patterns of action that would endure for decades.

As discussed in Chapter 2, institutions are formed by identifiable mechanisms, and when these mechanisms can be readily detected, they serve as indicators of institutional forces at work. *Displacement and conversion* worked at one time or another in building all five of the constituencies, taking a ready-made community of interest focused on one issue and repurposing the group for another issue. In the first decade, the U.S. replaced Britain and the Shah as an adversary for Iran. In the second decade, Iran replaced the Soviet Union as a key geopolitical adversary for the U.S. For Israel, hostility

toward Iran replaced hostility toward its Arab neighbors. The impact of *layering* has already been discussed, and the laundry list of issues that became attached to the U.S.-Iranian relationship was becoming extensive. Terrorism, sanctions, grievances over injuries (real or perceived), human rights, and domestic politics were only a few of important layers impacting the conflict. In general, the proliferation of layers complicates attempts at peace and creates new avenues by which constituencies can undermine these efforts – a problem which played out in the 1990's. Finally, the 1990's saw the beginnings of *drift*, as leadership changed hands in both countries. This was not as strong a factor as it would become, though, because so much continuity remained in key personalities.

Ultimately, these institutional processes manifested themselves in the five constituencies to the conflict. The role of constituencies in perpetuating conflict is not always direct, but once a conflict penetrates the core of a group's interest calculations, even decisions that have nothing to do with the international opponent will affect the relationship. This means that long-term patterns are often more important in identifying the operation of constituencies than a focus on individual events. When powerful constituencies exist on both sides of the conflict, they form a system in which the component parts feed off of each other and become greater than the whole. This system creates a poisonous environment that undermines possibilities for peace.

Chapter 5 will explain how the 1990's, which opened and closed with such promise, could lead into a decade of intense stalemate and new forms of violence. Constituencies will take an even more prominent role in the story, and the intractability of the conflict will become more stark than ever.

CHAPTER 5 - THE THIRD DECADE, 2001-2008

The third decade of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran marked a generational shift in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Over the course of the decade, a significant portion of both populations came of age with no living memory of the foundational events of the institution of animosity between the two adversaries. Leaders emerged within the constituencies who remembered the events of the 1980's from their youth, but were shaped and molded to a greater degree by things that came afterward, while the dwindling members of the old guard struggled to maintain their own relevance in a shifting world. The 2000's added a set of new issues and events onto which the institutional *layers* of previous two decades were superimposed, shaping the way both sides would deal with each other in light of a changing environment. The U.S. began a war on terror, a concept that almost inevitably put it at odds with Iran. Iran's nuclear program went from an aspirational project to a viable enterprise that the Western world viewed as an imminent threat. Wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan created opportunities for both cooperation and conflict.

From the standpoint of realpolitik, there were few pressing reasons why the U.S-Iranian relationship had to remain antagonistic. With the exception of the Khobar Towers bombing, direct conflict between the U.S. and Iran had been mostly rhetorical for a number of years. The benefits of rapprochement may not have seemed obvious in advance, but in hindsight, they appear quite stark. Iran could have blossomed economically through better relations with the West. The U.S. could have collaborated with Iran in rebuilding both Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, Iran increased its political and economic isolation from the world, stifling its potential and disappointing its population over a nuclear program that provided no tangible benefits whatsoever. The U.S. conducted a war on terror and invaded two of Iran's neighbors in spite of Iran, instead of with its help. For the Iraq War, in particular, Iranian resistance cost hundreds of U.S. lives, billions of dollars, and most likely prolonged the war by

several years. As the official U.S. Army history of the war concluded (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 639), Iran was the only winner in that war, despite U.S. attempts to exclude them entirely. In Afghanistan, U.S. inability to garner reliable regional partners left the Afghan people no closer to long-term stability at the end of the decade than they were in the aftermath of the invasion. In short, the U.S. and Iran carried a mutually damaging stalemate into a new generation and came out more mired in the conflict than before.

This chapter will trace the story of missed opportunities for positive change from an institutional lens, focused on two key time periods. The first period will roughly cover the initial term of George W. Bush's presidency and discuss how both sides squandered the opportunity to pursue a "grand bargain." The second period will approximate the first term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in Iran, where negotiations over Iran's nuclear program could have changed the direction of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and Iran's proxy war in Iraq helped ensure that they did not. As before, it will follow the five constituencies that consistently undermined rapprochement and stoked hostility: Iran's clerical establishment, the IRGC and clerical security forces, CENTCOM, Israel, and the U.S. Congress. Along the way, it will deal with potential counterarguments against the pivotal role of these constituencies in perpetuating the conflict.

'Axis of Evil' and the 'Grand Bargain'

The first term of the George W. Bush administration was one of the most storied periods in the history of the U.S.-Iranian conflict. The previous decade had witnessed at least three potential openings where either the U.S. or Iran made significant gestures toward the other. Each generated some hopes, but in none of these cases did either side extend themselves to the point where they made the policy or behavior changes the other side was interested in seeing. Perhaps predictably, each attempt failed.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Iran offered the U.S. an unprecedented level of cooperation. This apparent change of heart culminated in the 2003 proposal for a "grand bargain" between the U.S. and Iran, in which Iranian leaders explicitly offered to negotiate over every key point of contention concerning U.S. officials and begin the process of normalizing relations. As this section will explain, U.S. officials barely even considered the offer. On one hand, this section will argue that these historical events provide perhaps the strongest evidence so far that institutional forces were driving the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. On the other hand, the behavior of the constituents this dissertation has been following was not entirely predictable, and additional forces intervened. This section will examine why this was the case and discuss the implications for an institutional lens to the study of conflict.

What happened?

The November 2000 presidential election in the U.S. was a memorable event. After a close contest (Mann 2001) involving lengthy recounts, a controversy over "hanging chads," and intervention by the Supreme Court, George W. Bush emerged the victor. Like his predecessor (Crist 2012, 423) (Freedman 2008, 376-377), Bush came to office focused on domestic issues; foreign affairs were not an immediate priority, and Iran barely registered. During the Bush campaign, his soon-to-be National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice (2000, 46-47) authored an article that would come to define the initial foreign policy stance of the administration. Rice argued for a disciplined approach to foreign policy that returned the "national interest" to the forefront of decision making instead of the "humanitarian interest" that had prompted the Clinton administration to get involved in complicated nation-building exercises. Such an approach would "deal decisively with the threat of rogue regimes," and it would confront the proliferation of WMD. It would strengthen alliances with key partners but

would avoid allowing international institutions to bind America's hands or cause it to act against the national interest. The article painted Iran specifically as a power that was attempting to replace the American-led global order with one based upon Islamic fundamentalism. Bush's views appeared entirely in-line with this approach as he entered office, and with regard to terrorism especially (Woodward 2002, 38-39), he believed that Clinton's response to attacks had been so limp as to be provocative of future terrorism.

Unlike Clinton and George H. W. Bush before him, Bush extended no hand to the Iranian regime upon coming to office. Senior State Department official Richard Haas (Slavin 2007, 196-197) authored one conciliatory gesture, a three-year shortening of the mandatory period during which ILSA sanctions would be enacted. Bush supported this plan, but the Republican-controlled Congress turned it down. The single forum in which U.S. and Iranian officials continued to maintain contact in continuity between the Clinton and Bush administrations was a U.N.-brokered group known as the Geneva Initiative (Rashid 2008, 55, 66) (Slavin 2007, 198), which brought the U.S., Iran, Germany, and Italy together to discuss the challenge of Afghanistan. This was a natural evolution of the 6+2 talks which Albright had once previously attended herself, but it was restricted to low-level officials and it avoided any appearance of bilateral communication between the U.S. and Iran.

As the previous chapter described, Iran had been surprisingly unreceptive to the Clinton administration's overtures even to the very end, but the winds of change were blowing in Iran, as well as the U.S. Reformist candidates (Daniszewsky 2000) captured the nation's first set of municipal elections in 1999, and then in February 2000, they gained a commanding majority in the parliament. In opposition to this trend, official and unofficial repression limited the progress of the reform agenda at almost every turn, and many Iranians became disillusioned with Khatami's inability or unwillingness to stand up to the clerical establishment. More disturbingly, the reform movement (Ansari 2004, 277) struggled to articulate a clear strategic vision. For the time being, though, it still presented the only

alternative to the stale status quo defended by hardliners, and Iranians (Slackman 2001) handed Khatami a second term as president in June 2001 with approximately 75 percent of the vote, even higher than his previous victory in 1997. What this power struggle between reformists and conservatives largely masked was that values and priorities were shifting within the Iranian populace. A poll (Maloney 2015, 296-297) of Tehran residents conducted in 2002 showed that economic matters were the top priority for Iranian voters, dwarfing concerns over the lack of political freedom. Intrinsically linked to their economic concerns, Iranians desired greater engagement with the outside world, including America. Another poll in 2002 (Rieffer-Flanagan 2013, 154) showed that 74 percent of Iranians living in Tehran favored opening a dialogue with the U.S.

In fact, even while conservative factions fought to deny Khatami the credit, Iran's economy was on the upswing, along with its external relations. Some of this had little to do with Khatami at all. A number of development projects (Abrahamian 2004, 134-136) across the country that had been delayed by the Iran-Iraq War and its aftermath were finally bearing fruit by the late 1990's, including some of Rafsanjani's initiatives. On the other hand, Khatami's diplomatic outreach (Maloney 2015, 273-276, 293-298) had also borne fruit. In spite of U.S. pressure, most European nations had normalized relations with Iran by 2000, and several signed significant trade deals. Additionally, Iran made inroads with its regional neighbors, reestablishing cordial relations with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in particular. Khatami's administration also initiated some of its own economic programs, including a revamp of foreign exchange rate practices. The result was an economic resurgence that could be felt by the time of the 2001 election, with inflation down to 11.3 percent from its 1995 high of 50 percent. Boosted by high oil prices (Abrahamian 2004, 132-134), Iran's GNP jumped between 5 and 7 percent year-over-year between 2000 and 2003. On a more symbolic front, Iran garnered two World Bank loans for development projects, over U.S. objections that this would legitimize Tehran's regime.

These gains (Maloney 2015, 300-306) were followed through the second half of Khatami's presidency by significant trade expansion with Russia and East Asia (especially China), major reforms to Iran's rules for allowing foreign investment, and a continued push for domestic privatization of the economy. In effect, Iran's international isolation at the beginning of the Bush administration was largely nominal. This does not mean that Iran's economy was healthy, but people were seeing a difference. Instead of producing contentment, though, in a manner consistent with relative deprivation theory (see Gurr 2010), a little improvement fostered a taste for more. The Iranian population agitated for tangible progress, and the conditions for engagement with the U.S. were once again ripe on the Iranian side.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 which destroyed the World Trade Center in New York and a portion of the Pentagon, near Washington, D.C., changed the landscape (Freedman 2008, 385-396) of American foreign policy immediately. An examination of this tragedy is beyond the scope of this work, but the Bush administration quickly began its planning for an invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime, which harbored Osama Bin Laden and the leadership of the al-Qaeda terrorist group. Bush's vision extended far wider than Afghanistan from the start, and addressing a joint session of congress on September 20, he stated (Tenet and Harlow 2008, 179), "Our war on terror begins with al-Qa'ida [*sic*], but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated." This statement portended badly for the U.S.-Iranian relationship, which had been *layered* repeatedly with terrorist-related incidents, accusations, and rhetoric.

Unlike certain Arab countries, where public reactions were mixed and government repudiation of the attackers lukewarm, Khatami (Sick 2004, 235-236) immediately condemned the attacks, along with all forms of terrorism. Iranians held candlelight vigils in Tehran for the victims. Khatami (Crist 2012, 432) travelled to U.N. General Assembly in New York, and he requested to visit "ground zero," also offering counterterrorism collaboration from senior Iranian experts on al-Qaeda. The Bush

administration turned these down. The Geneva Initiative group (Rashid 2008, 66), however, met on September 20, leading to a secret bilateral meeting (Freidman 2004, 155-160) on September 25. Senior IRGC officials attended and met with U.S. officials, including representatives of the CIA. Geneva Initiative talks continued until 2003, but when direct talks were not preferred, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw served as a go-between to facilitate communication. The Iranians (Crist 2012, 432) offered to allow the U.S. to use their airbases. The Bush administration declined this request but accepted emergency landing rights for stricken aircraft. The Iranians also closed their border at the U.S. request and continued to support some 2 million Afghan refugees.

On the ground in Afghanistan (Friedman 2004, 197-198), Iran offered cooperation by facilitating contacts with Northern Alliance members, although it does not appear that U.S. officials made extensive use of this. Where the Iranians were more reserved was in regard to the al-Qaeda fugitives that had fled into its territory. U.S. officials asked repeatedly (Slavin 2007, 198-201) for full details on all of these individuals, along with deportations that would facilitate their transfer to U.S. custody. Iran turned over at least one high-value al-Qaeda leader, and provided information on scores of refugees they had deported, but they chose to hang onto hundreds more, placing them under house (or hotel) arrest. Crist (2012, 437) explained that the Iranians viewed these individuals as valuable bargaining chips with the U.S. and leverage against future al-Qaeda plots.

Slavin (2007, 197) pointed out that the Iranians chose to offer their support with no preconditions, sensing a golden opportunity to take down the Taliban and make inroads with the U.S. at the same time. However, Friedman (2004, 155-160) also mentioned that the Iranians also had a geopolitical interest in carving out future autonomy for the Shiite areas of Afghanistan, creating a de facto buffer zone for Iran. The U.S. had no interest in Afghan nation building and gave a nod to these concerns. Motives aside, the Iranian delegation played an important role in the Bonn Conference, which began in November 1981 to discuss the future leadership of Afghanistan. Per Rashid (2008, 104), "U.S.

and Iranian diplomats met continuously night and day in the hotel." The Iranians were particularly instrumental in convincing leading warlords, especially Burhanuddin Rabbani, to stay their own bids for power and support an interim government led by Hamid Karzai. In January 2002 (Sick 2004, 236), Iran pledged $560 million for reconstruction of Afghanistan at a conference in Tokyo, the most of any country in the developing world.

In the midst of this positive synergy between the U.S. and Iran, a spoiler soon emerged. On January 3, 2002 (Bennet 2002), Israeli forces intercepted a cargo ship, the *Karine A*, that was transporting a large shipment of weapons to Palestinian militants in Gaza. Israeli intelligence linked the operation directly to senior officials within Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority as well as the Iranian government. At other times, such a revelation might have seemed merely a blip on the screen, but in this case, it had a powerful impact on the Bush administration, especially Bush himself. In his memoir, Bush (2011, 400-401) expressed his sense of betrayal by Arafat, stating that he would never trust him again. Bush had already been concerned about terrorist attacks against Israel, brought home by the June 1, 2001 attack on a Tel Aviv nightclub. He was appalled at the loss of life on both sides. As usual, Iran denied the incident and blamed it on an Israeli plot. Sick (2004, 236) opined that if the Israelis had planned the incident themselves, it could not have worked more perfectly. The IRGC was playing was playing the same games it had always played, and terrorism *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict returned to the forefront.

Bush's January 29, 2002 State of the Union Address went down in history as one of the pivotal moments in the perpetuation of animosity between the U.S. and Iran. With the Taliban defeated and al-Qaeda on the run, the Bush administration began to look beyond Afghanistan to a wider war on terror, and set its sights on Iraq. Bush tasked his policy team (Baker 2012, 186-187) (Woodward 2004, 85-95) to craft language that would convey this vision to the American people, and his speechwriters did not disappoint. In order avoid tipping their hand too early with regard to Iraq, Bush's team lumped it

together with North Korea and Iran in an "axis of evil," laying the foundation for a narrative that linked the dangers of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. While never meant to imply collaboration among the three actors, this statement effectively bifurcated the world, and it irrevocably placed Iran in the opposite camp. Some of Bush's own advisors questioned Iran's inclusion prior to the speech, but Bush himself chose to keep it in (Baker 2012, 186), stating, "I want to turn up the pressure on Iran."

Bush (2011, 233) later acknowledged that people had people had missed the point of the "axis of evil," which had been primarily intended to convey that he was, "serious about dealing with Iraq." Regarding Iran, Bush paradoxically believed that applying this label would spur the efforts of Iran's reformers against the hardline clerical establishment. He said afterward (Woodward 2004, 88), "I doubt the students and the reformers and the liberators inside Iran were displeased with that. I made the calculation that they would be pleased. Up here the president speaks so clearly about the nature of the regime and the harshness and the repression they have to live under. Now, I'm confident the leaders didn't like it." Based upon these statements, it appears that Bush essentially provided a sop to the constituencies arrayed on the U.S. side in support of the conflict with Iran in order to garner support for his war against Iraq. Throwing the U.S.-Iranian relationship under the bus for short-term political gain was a pattern well established on both sides of the conflict, and the next section will discuss Bush's relationship with the constituencies in greater detail.

Meanwhile, Abrahamian (2004, 95) described that, "For the average Iranian, the 'axis of evil' speech came as a bolt out of the blue sky." Iranians thought their relationship with the U.S. was improving. Citizens and government alike had condemned the Taliban and terrorism, and they hugely resented being categorized with their rival state, Iraq. The Iranian government (Crist 2012, 441-442) issued protests, their officials skipped the next Geneva Initiative meeting, and Iran became less cooperative in Afghanistan. They released the troublemaking Taliban commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to start fomenting an insurgency and starting anti-American propaganda efforts on the ground. Yet

even though this was a symbolic turning point in the relationship, Iran still returned to Geneva and continued overtures of cooperation. As they did, U.S. priorities were already shifting from Afghanistan, and the rest of 2002 and the first four months of 2003 were shaped and dominated almost entirely by the impending invasion of Iraq.

The U.S.-Iranian relationship between the "axis of evil" speech and the successful invasion of Iraq moved forward simultaneously along three key strands. First, Iranian officials continued to offer collaboration with the U.S. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein was generally within Iran's strategic interest, and sensing Bush's resolve, the Iranians attempted to shape U.S. efforts instead of bucking against them. Mohammad Javad Zarif (Crist 2012, 455-459) (Slavin 2007, 201-203), then Iran's ambassador to the U.N., began an effort in September 2002 to extend engagement beyond the bounds of the Geneva Initiative, quietly meeting with a number of past and present U.S. officials. Zarif offered to partner with the U.S. in toppling the Iraqi regime, a similar offer to the one for Afghanistan, and he suggested the possibility of normalizing relations. What Iran expressly wanted in return was guarantees regarding the status of Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) members found in Iraq. Aside from emergency landing rights for U.S. pilots, the Bush administration wanted little to do with Iranian assistance, but they assured their counterparts that the U.S. considered the MEK a terrorist group and would treat it accordingly. The perception of broken promises was already and established *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and this assurance created the opportunity to thicken the *layer*.

The second strand, which worked in a negative direction, was the advancement of Iran's nuclear program. Cable News Network (Ensor 2002) broke the story in December 2002 that an Iranian dissident group, which turned out to be the MEK, had provided intelligence regarding two previously undeclared nuclear sites in Iran. They also highlighted the fact that Iran was pursuing heavy water nuclear reactors that could be used to manufacture weapons-grade fissile material. This was probably no surprise to the U.S. intelligence community, and in the runup to the invasion of Iraq, it did not generate immediate

policy action. What it did was publicly highlight the issue and tee it up for future action, ensuring that the nuclear *layer* could not be disentangled from any U.S. dealings with Iran, and this issue would eventually define the relationship for almost two decades afterward.

The third strand was the link between Iran and terrorism. For tactical reasons, Iran had originally demurred on cooperating with the U.S. in regard to most of the al-Qaeda fugitives that had entered its territory, but the longer it held them, the more culpable Iran became in al-Qaeda's activities. Leverett and Leverett (2013, 120-121) pointed out that because counterterrorism was the highest U.S. priority, any cooperation necessarily hinged on Iran's turning them over. Much like the Lebanon hostages before, Iranian officials likely viewed al-Qaeda members as bargaining chips. For U.S. officials, they were living evidence of Iran's continued support for terrorism. Crist (2012, 438) relayed that U.S. intelligence traced the al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who would later lead the Sunni insurgency in Iraq) to Iran in 2002. Bush toyed with authorizing a strike inside Iranian territory to kill Zarqawi, even before invading Iraq, but the risks were too high. Between late 2002 and early 2003, the CIA (Tenet and Harlow 2008, 244, 272-275) monitored a steady stream of communications that showed al-Qaeda operatives within Iran were actively seeking access to Russian nuclear devices and collaborating in upcoming terrorist attacks.

These strands collided in May of 2003. If the "axis of evil" speech was a symbolic pivot point, Iran's "grand bargain" was a more substantial critical juncture. Shortly after the U.S. victory in Iraq, as the culmination of Zarif's diplomatic efforts, Iranian officials passed a proposal (Mousavian 2012, 63-65) through the Swiss delegation that offered to formally discuss every major sticking point between the U.S. and Iran in pursuit of normalized relations. In return for a respectful recognition of its legitimate interests, Iran was willing to discuss its nuclear program, rebuilding Iraq, its support for Palestinian militant groups, and even recognition of Israel, among other issues - all with the apparent blessing of Khamenei himself. Zarif (2003) followed this up with an Op Ed in the New York Times suggesting that

the U.S. and Iran should collaborate on rebuilding Iraq and developing a comprehensive Middle East security plan.

At virtually the same time, however, a U.S. newspaper (Slavin 2007, 203-204) broke the story about the secret meetings of the Geneva Initiative. Vice President Dick Cheney and a number of key Bush officials had vehemently opposed engagement with Iran from the beginning, so to avoid embarrassment, the administration chose to downplay the effort and cancelled future meetings. Additionally, al-Qaeda (Crist 2012, 480-481) conducted a series of coordinated attacks against U.S. interests in Saudi Arabia on May 12, 2003, and a phone intercept linked the attack to an al-Qaeda operative residing in Iran. Leverett and Leverett (2013, 121) pointed out that Iranian complicity was never corroborated, but the resulting suspicions clearly aggravated the terrorism *layer* of the relationship. Regardless of the impact of the press disclosure and the terrorist attack, the Bush administration was in no mood to consider a "grand bargain" with Iran. State Department official Richard Haas (Slavin 2007, 208) stated afterward that he would have liked to explore the option, but he could not trust Iran's factional politics, and he was tired of fighting losing battles within the Bush administration. The offer may not have even reached Condoleezza Rice, who stated (Slavin 2007, 205), "I honestly don't remember seeing it." The proposal itself was not signed, so it was deemed a "non-paper." The U.S. issued no response, and Iran would never again extend such an offer. As the next section will discuss, it was no coincidence that the conditions for such a windfall of diplomacy were so unfavorable. Constituencies on both sides made the U.S. unable to accept such a proposal and Iran incapable of following through, regardless of the best intentions of the deal's proponents.

From this peak of apparent potential, the U.S.-Iranian relationship quickly soured. The U.S. (Slavin 2007, 206) reneged on its promises regarding the MEK in Iraq. Sensing their value in any future conflict with Iran, military officials gave them protected person status. Even when Iran offered to trade them for al-Qaeda suspects, the U.S. declined. Iran wasted no time in proliferating its influence and its

intelligence capabilities in Iraq (Friedman 2004, 316-319), using preexisting Shiite militia networks as a tool. U.S. officials recognized this threat almost immediately, but because they needed the support of the Shiite groups to quell the Sunni insurgency (led by loyalists to the former regime), they took little action. With the capture of Saddam Hussein and improvements in the tactical situation, the U.S. reconsidered its bargain with the Shiite factions (and their Iranian backers by extension) to give them a controlling interest in the new government. In another forgotten historical episode, an earthquake largely destroyed the Iranian city of Bam in late December 2003. The U.S. offered shipments of humanitarian relief, which Iran graciously accepted, but when the Bush administration wanted to send official envoys and further capitalize on this gesture of goodwill, Iran turned them down. Friedman (2004, 318) argued that the Iranians were well aware that the U.S. was preparing to trample their interests in Iraq, and Iran's hardliners were no longer interested in rapprochement. By early 2004, a full-scale Shiite insurgency was brewing, and Iran was poised to impose a terrible cost on U.S. forces.

As this section has shown, U.S. and Iranian leaders exercised considerable agency throughout this period, in some cases making overtures, while fomenting hostility in others. It is easy to focus on Bush, Khamenei, and perhaps Khatami as the main characters in this story, as most historical accounts have already been wont to do. Before making this leap, however, it is important to understand the role that constituencies played behind the scenes. Whether they influenced events directly (which they did in some cases) or indirectly, institutional forces on both sides of the conflict had spent over 20 years making the ground infertile for cooperation between the U.S. and Iran. The next section will argue that continued hostility was by far the most likely outcome for this period, regardless of actors or intentions, and the institution of animosity only gathered steam.

The institutional development of constituencies

The events of this time period present the first real challenge to the pattern this dissertation has identified so far. On one hand, this episode offers what was arguably the clearest example of a convergence of interests between the U.S. and Iran that occurred throughout the four decades under study. In hindsight, both sides could have saved a fortune in blood and treasure by collaborating instead of perpetuating the conflict. But like every other opportunity before it, this one fell flat, perpetuating the conflict instead of resolving it. Additionally, even a cursory reading of the history suggests that institutional *layers* such as terrorism and the nuclear issue, along with the grudges and mistrust ingrained by two decades of hostility played a significant part.

On the other hand, this drama played out differently than previous examples. For a brief moment, it appeared that Iran's clerical establishment, already identified as a constituent to the conflict, reversed its course and supported rapprochement. Even the IRGC and clerical security forces appeared to behave nicely, although this will be discussed further. Constituencies on the U.S. side operated differently, as well. None of the U.S. Congress, CENTCOM, or the Israeli lobby supported reconciliation with Iran, but neither were any of them the key player in undermining cooperation. Instead, a headstrong U.S. President, bolstered by a neoconservative ideology that pervaded his administration (especially embodied in Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld), took the lead in ensuring that that U.S. and Iran were not going to become friends. This section will deal first with the Iranian constituents to the conflict. It will then look at neoconservatism and evaluate where this factor fits into the institutional story of the conflict. Finally, it will turn to the constituents on the U.S. side.

The first puzzle is why the clerical establishment seemed to acquiesce to Khatami's attempts to normalize Iran's relations with the U.S. Should they not have undermined these efforts, as they had

every time before? There are several plausible reasons, consistent with institutional factors, that may explain why they did not. With regard to Afghanistan, both the Taliban and al-Qaeda were immediate regional threats to Iran. After the Taliban executed nine Iranian diplomats in 1998 (Jehl 1998), Iran mobilized for war against Afghanistan, nearly initiating military action. Khamenei (Friedman 2004, 155-160) wanted the Taliban out of power, a new government that would be friendly to Iran, and Shiite buffer zone against the Sunni Pashtun tribes and their Pakistani supporters. Not only was a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan expedient for Iran, but one could argue that *displacement and conversion* operated naturally, as well. U.S. anger at Afghanistan's rulers drew its attention away from Iran, so Iran's leaders were more comfortable focusing on their own threat next door, a temporary *displacement* to be sure, but significant, nonetheless. The same logic applied to Iraq. The U.S. was willing and eager to expend its own efforts to topple Iran's bitter rival, Saddam Hussein. Moreover, Iran (Crist 2012, 468-469) already had networks in place to start building its influence among the Shiites of Iraq and shaping the country. *Displacement* occurs when a new threat or opportunity overshadows the previous one for a particular constituency, and it need not be permanent. This was an opportunity for Iran's clerical leaders.

The expediency of allowing the U.S. to defeat its adversaries could explain Iran's cooperative stance before the U.S. military actions, but it still cannot explain why Iran offered a "grand bargain" *after* Saddam Hussein's defeat. One common explanation (Slavin 2007, 204-205) is that Iranian leaders were surprised by the speed and efficiency of U.S. military successes and feared that Iran might be next. The instinct for self-preservation can operate as a form of *displacement*, again on a temporary basis. A soldier might consider surrender on the battlefield in the face of overwhelming odds, but when the threat passes, his enemies are no less enemies. As the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq and appeared less threatening, the Iranians became more aggressive. But some felt that Iran's "grand bargain" was not intended as a form of capitulation. Leverett and Leverett (2013, 123) in sympathy to Iran, argued that their proposal was not made from a position of weakness but was a genuine expression of

frustration with U.S. attempts to isolate Iran in its own neighborhood. Perhaps an even more compelling argument could be made by examining the domestic political situation.

By the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Khamenei and the clerical establishment were both more and less secure in their own position than they had been previously. On one hand, they had largely weathered the storm of the reform movement (Nasr and Gheissari 2006, 138-145). Repression proved generally effective in tamping down unrest, Khatami had shown himself unwilling to challenge the system directly, and Khamenei's control over the Council of Guardians and the Expediency Council ensured that no legislation that directly threatened his position could be passed. On the other hand, conservatives understood that they were unpopular, and their long-term viability depended upon rebranding their image. Conservative factions were already beginning to reinvent themselves in ways that would bear fruit in 2004 and 2005. In the meantime, bandwagoning on a popular issue like rapprochement with the West was likely in their immediate interest, if only for a brief moment. If the attempt did not work out, Khamenei could back away and leave the reformers holding the bag.

One more possibility to consider was that, as Bush administration officials apparently suspected, this offer was disingenuous on the part of the Supreme Leader to begin with. As Iranian leaders had shown with the Lebanon hostages and would again demonstrate later in the 2000's with the nuclear negotiations, they were inclined to use diplomacy to buy time and manipulate conditions toward their advantage. Clausewitz referred to war as "politics by other means." In a similar fashion, the clerical establishment may have viewed diplomacy as "war by other means," a new front against the U.S. that undermined American military advantages. If any or all of these possibilities obtained to some degree, then clerical support to Khatami's overtures no longer appears inconsistent with the institution of animosity between the U.S. and Iran. Regardless of the rationale employed by specific leaders, the worldview of Iran’s clerical leaders never changed with regard to confronting the U.S. Short-term

exigencies could alter their approach, but these would always be mediated through an incentive structure that ensured that hostility would always be renewed.

Where Khamenei certainly hedged his bets against the U.S. all along was in regard to the IRGC. The IRGC may have kept a lower profile, but they were clearly not supporters of rapprochement. First, at least until Iran was confronted by the international community in 2003, the IRGC (Ensor 2002) was moving as quickly and quietly as possible to develop a dual-use nuclear capability. This included constructing heavy water reactors, an old technology difficult to justify for civilian electrical consumption, along with the capacity to enrich fissile material. Second, as previously discussed, the IRGC and clerical security forces implicated themselves with terrorism by harboring al-Qaeda fugitives who were actively planning and coordinating operations. Third, while the *Karine A* incident (Crist 2012, 436) did not appear to be a calculated attempt to sabotage relations with the U.S., their pattern of continued supporting to Palestinian militants and attempts to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process were completely inconsistent with reconciliation. Fourth, IRGC commanders were chomping at the bit for action against the U.S. in Iraq.

Per Crist (2012, 461-467) both the IRGC commander, Major General Yahya Safavi and Qods Force Commander Major General Qassim Soleimani advocated military action against the U.S. in Iraq from the very beginning of the war. Khamenei initially restrained the guards from conducting attacks, but they still harassed and threatened U.S. forces along the border with Iran, especially in the Shatt-al-Arab waterways. MOIS and IRGC officers laid the groundwork in Iraq for heavy Iranian influence, and as the relationship between the coalition and the Shiite factions deteriorated, Khamenei allowed the IRGC to begin a proxy war against U.S. forces. As a constituent to the conflict, the IRGC and clerical security forces successfully aggravated the *layers* of terrorism, nuclear weapons, Israel, and they started a new *layer* - insurgency in Iraq. There was no "grand bargain" from the IRGC, and it is highly unlikely that this organization would have allowed such a deal to gain positive momentum even if the U.S. had played

ball. Any form of rapprochement would necessarily have diminished the prominence of the IRGC in steering Iranian politics.

The next issue to examine in the institutional analysis of this episode of the conflict was the impact of neoconservatism as a driving ideology for the Bush administration, possibly superseding the influence of the constituencies that had previously driven the U.S. side of the conflict. A detailed examination of the history and development of neoconservatism is beyond the scope of this work, but this concept has been widely blamed for the animosity between the U.S. and Iran (Leverett and Leverett 2013, 285-327) (Abrahamian 2004, 96-102), and it must be considered. Neoconservatism is problematic to begin with because it is not a unified theory with an agreed upon definition or scope. Broadly speaking, neoconservatives believe that the spread of democracy, even by force, is the most effective way to secure U.S. global interests in the long-term. Most neoconservatives of the period did not self-identify, and individuals were generally labelled "neo-cons" by their critics, not their peers, making the label almost entirely subjective. Freedman (2008, 375-376) described neoconservatism as a philosophy which combines activism over causes traditionally associated with the left, such as promoting democracy and human rights, with methods traditionally associated with the right - especially the unilateral application of military force. Walt (2018, 69) linked the concept to liberal hegemony, noting that neoconservative ideology actually derived from roots on both sides of the political aisle, but it took a more militant and less cooperative form on the Republican side. Neoconservatism has been most strongly associated with the decision to invade Iraq, which was also its most damning failure.

Where did neoconservatism intersect with the U.S.-Iran conflict? Authors have traced neoconservatism beck to the 1970's even prior to the Reagan administration (Takeyh 2006, 126), and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 energized the movement. Identifying it as a *layer* to the U.S.-Iranian relationship in the early days of the Islamic Republic would be difficult, though. In spite of his tough talk, Reagan showed restraint in his approach to Iran. In fact, later authors associated with the

neoconservatism like Kenneth Pollack (2004, 204, 214) criticized Reagan for his lack of response to Iranian-sponsored terrorism in Lebanon and his ham-handed attempts to negotiate with Iran over the hostages. The 1990's might appear a more promising starting point for a neoliberal constituency, when Republicans came to forefront in Congress under the leadership of Newt Gingrich. However, as shown in the previous chapter, Democrats took an interest in punishing Iran, as well, complicating efforts by Clinton administration to extend an olive branch.

When Bush came to office in 2001, foreign policy was not at the forefront of his agenda, and Iran took a very low priority. Bush's cabinet has been described as being bifurcated between two camps, the more dovish led by Secretary of State Colin Powell, and the more hawkish by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld and Cheney have sometimes been lumped together with the neo-cons, but Freedman (2008, 375-376) described them instead as hard-power realists, determined to protect and expand U.S. influence. In Freedman's view, defense official Paul Wolfowitz was the leading neo-con in the U.S. government. With regard to Iraq, the realist hawks were looking for an opportunity to deal decisively with Saddam Hussein, and for a moment, neoconservative ideology provided a convenient narrative around which to rally support. This same narrative had also animated the War on Terror, and it apparently resonated with President Bush, especially after 9-11.

The neoconservatism for which the Bush administration has been so often criticized found its moment in the sun between 2001 and 2003. It was fueled far more by al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein than by Iran. Where it concerned Iran, neoconservatism intersected with historical grudges held by long-time Republican stalwarts like Cheney and Rumsfeld, examples more of institutional *layering* than belief in a liberal internationalist ideology. Neoconservatism appealed to President Bush, but again, his "axis of evil" declaration was more about Iraq than Iran. Further, the human rights *layer* of the conflict, which came into play after Khatami's election, had heavily influenced Bush's perception of the Iranian

people. He believed that average Iranians were poised to overthrow their tyrannical regime and wholeheartedly embrace Western values. In sum, the neoconservative narrative served as an all-too-convenient packaging device for articulating *layers* of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran that had already been built over the years. One could make an argument that neoconservatism was in institution in itself, but within the context of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, it functioned more like a *layer*. As so often occurs, it originally derived from outside the relationship, but as it embedded itself, it rearticulated and renewed the *layers* that came before it.

Was the Bush administration then a whole new constituent to the conflict? It was certainly an actor, but so were the other administrations before it. There can be no definitive answer, but the more pertinent question for a theoretical analysis is whether it is useful to treat the Bush administration, or even Bush himself, as a distinct constituent. This dissertation argues that it is not. First, in spite of the views he occasionally expressed, Bush rarely focused attention on Iran during his first term in office. His extension of humanitarian aid after the Bam earthquake and his poorly conceived but well-intentioned attempt to find solidarity with Iran's reformers through the "axis of evil" speech also suggested that he was not as deeply invested in animosity against Iran as some of his advisors. As the next section will show, Bush eventually turned around and made overtures of his own toward Iran during his second term. Additionally, as previously discussed, the actions of the Bush administration reflected the institutional entrenchment of animosity with Iran from preceding decades more so than any emergent ideology. Perhaps the most important question to ask, however, if whether Bush could have successfully pursued rapprochement with Iran if he had wanted to do so. The previously identified constituents (CENTCOM, Israel, and the U.S. Congress) were fully active throughout this period. If their influence would have been enough to strangle cooperation in the cradle, then arguments over the effect of neoconservative ideology become less salient. This dissertation contends that this was exactly the case.

Finally, one could argue that constituencies were not necessary to stoke the conflict if the U.S. president was hostile to Iran. However, this section has shown that Bush's stance toward Iran was not consistent (and would become less so during his second administration). Bush's decisions regarding Iran were mediated through the lens of other priorities (his focus on terrorism and Iraq), and more importantly, they were actively shaped by each of the constituencies on the U.S. side, CENTCOM, Israel, and the U.S. Congress.

CENTCOM's role in stoking the conflict between the U.S. and Iran was indirect but entirely significant. CENTCOM Commander General Tommy Franks (2004) described in his memoir, the command was stretched to its limits in planning and executing two major wars on short notice in rapid succession. Reading through his memoir, one almost gets the sense that Iran did not exist. None of the Iranian overtures discussed in this section made any significant difference to CENTCOM or the U.S. military. On the other hand, Pakistan and the Arab Gulf States that CENTCOM had been cultivating for almost two decades were pivotal players throughout. The point that emerges is that CENTCOM had built a regional order in which Iran did not fit. Commanders saw no need for Iranian support, and if the Bush administration had tried to collaborate more actively with Iran, this would probably have jeopardized the precarious relationships with previously established partners.

Instead, the U.S. military simply tried to go around Iran while invading its neighbors. Iran offered to provide tactical support on the ground in Afghanistan, but with no approval from higher levels, U.S. troops had no basis from which to collaborate. They mostly kept a wary eye on Iranian activities, which became increasingly ominous over time anyway. Because Iran was deemed to have no place in determining the future of either Iraq or Afghanistan, CENTCOM made a priority (especially in Iraq) of seeking ways to limit Iranian influence and prevent "meddling." As a result, not only had U.S. troops directly surrounded Iran on two sides, but they were directly challenging Iranian interests in

shaping their neighborhood. Thus, two wars that originally had nothing to do with Iran (at least in the U.S. view) became *layers* on the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

If CENTCOM's role in fueling the conflict between the U.S. and Iran was indirect, this could not be said about Israel. Parsi (2007, 215-225) again provided the best narrative description available of the Israeli strategy during this period. Parsi explained that Iranian support for Hezbollah increased in the late 1990's after Rafsanjani's attempts at reconciliation with the U.S. failed, and many Israeli leaders began to consider Hezbollah more dangerous than Palestinian groups, an example of *displacement and conversion* in the Israeli camp. When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in April 2000, this undercut Hezbollah's influence and Iran's foothold in Lebanon. Iran responded by increasing its rhetoric and found itself pressured by its own promises into increasing support for Palestinian militants. By the time Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in March 2001, Israel was squarely opposed to Iran and determined to shape U.S. policy. Their first key victory under the Bush administration was in lobbying Congress, through AIPAC, to renew and extend the ILSA sanctions, over objections from State Department officials like Richard Haas. This insured that the Bush could not start his administration with a symbolic olive branch toward Iran.

Parsi (2007, 227-235) argued that after 9/11, Israeli leaders understood that they had little to offer in a war in Afghanistan. They watched the U.S. build strategic relationships with Muslim countries across the region, which potentially undermined their own influence with Washington, and they were determined to ensure that this list did not include Iran. For this reason, the Israeli lobby (AIPAC especially) joined forces with prominent neo-conservative officials and think-tank analysts in attempting to tie Hezbollah and their Syrian and Iranian supporters into the U.S. target list for the global war on terror. With U.S. attention focused on the war against the Taliban, they made little headway at first, although they attempted to undermine the Geneva Initiative in any way they could. The *Karine A* incident, however, was a public relations coup for Israel, and they exploited it to the full. Their reaction

to the incident effectively reduced the momentum of the Geneva Initiative, convinced the Pentagon that Iran was collaborating with al-Qaeda, and brought Iran to President Bush's attention as he considered his State of the Union address in January 2002.

While some commentators have blamed Israeli influence for the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, Parsi (2007, 239-252) points out that Israel initially opposed U.S. action against Iraq, arguing through both official and unofficial channels that Iran was the greater threat. Only once the die was cast did Sharon give his backing to the invasion, and then he publicly argued (Benn 2002) that Iraq should only be the first step on the way to a confrontation with Iran. When Iranian officials returned to the Geneva Initiative talks in the Spring of 2002 (after suspending them over the "axis of evil" speech), Israel again grew concerned. Parsi (2007, 242) described how Israel's supporters engineered a plot to ensure that Pentagon officials were noticed by the media in talks with an Iranian opposition group in June 2002. The Pentagon downplayed the meeting as a chance contact, nevertheless, the affair sowed distrust between the U.S. and Iran and helped prevent the Geneva Initiative from gaining more traction. Israel also pressured the U.S. government over Iran's nuclear program.

Solomon (2016, 114-117) explained that the MEK revelation to CNN regarding Iran's secret nuclear program was actually based upon Israeli intelligence, but Israel did not want to tip its hand and found the MEK a convenient conduit. Finally, Parsi (2007, 250-252) relayed that Iran offered a "grand bargain" to Israel even before its overture to Washington. While some officials were intrigued, Sharon's hardline supporters were not. Having advance notice of the Iranian offer before the Bush administration gave Israeli strategists time to continue undermining the U.S.-Iranian relationship prior to Washington's consideration of the "grand bargain."

Neither was the U.S. Congress any friend of rapprochement with Iran. Congress (Katzman 2006) renewed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) for 5 years in August 2001, tightening the definitions applied

to foreign investment and requiring a follow-up report from the Executive Branch on the effectiveness of sanctions - presumably to hold the President accountable for enforcing them. As previously mentioned, AIPAC conducted an all-out blitz to ensure that this bill went through. As was the case in the 1990's, however, neither side of the political aisle needed much prodding to oppose Iran. From 2001-2003 (U.S. House of Representatives 2020) (U.S. Senate 2020), both houses of Congress were split almost evenly between Republicans and Democrats. There was simply no significant block of American voters arguing for better relations with Iran and no political upside for taking the chance. After 9-11, few Americans were excited about compromising with states that had been associated with terrorism.

Country music singer Alan Jackson summed up the mood nicely with his hit song "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)," which carried the prominent line, "I'm not sure I can tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran." The point of the line was not that Americans were ignorant, but that Iran (like Iraq) was on the wrong side of public opinion. House Speaker Newt Gingrich summarized the opinion of many lawmakers when he said (Crist 2012, 433), "We confuse Americans, our allies, and our enemies when we speak of Iran joining the coalition against terrorism." In some cases, being tough on Iran carried a considerable upside. Senator Sam Brownback (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 294) appealed to evangelical Christians, Israel, and neoconservatives when he deliberately antagonized Iran by introducing an amendment in April 2004 that would have earmarked $50 million for support to Iranian opposition groups. Parsi (2007, 253-255) pointed out that the legislation only fell short because the groups in question did not appear credible.

In summary, the first term of the Bush presidency was an important period for the direction of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and it fully supported the contention that conflict is perpetuated through institutional mechanisms. The hawkish stance taken by the Bush administration and neoconservative ideologues may have muddied the waters and challenged the notion that constituencies can be discretely or definitively identified over time, but constituencies are not always discrete to begin with.

They certainly do not have to be obvious to be effective. The five constituencies to the conflict all behaved in a manner consistent with institutional predictions. While three on the U.S. side were apparently overshadowed by the agency of the "decider," President Bush, it is unlikely that the Bush administration had much political latitude to pursue rapprochement with Iran, anyway. Bush's decision space had already been shaped by constituencies to the conflict, and his ability to pursue policy priorities unrelated to Iran depended upon his willingness to play ball with these groups.

Ultimately, this period also thickened some *layers* of the conflict. These included betrayal (especially as the U.S. reneged on commitments concerning the MEK), squelching overtures that were politically costly to extend (the U.S. and Iran had been taking turns at this for decades now), sanctions, human rights, terrorism, threats against Israel, Iran's nuclear program. Neoconservatism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan added new *layers*, as well.

Ahmadinejad - An Odd Sort of Opportunity

At first glance, one might consider it odd to examine the election and early presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a case in potential rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran. Ahmadinejad quickly became known for his incendiary rhetoric against Israel and the West, and he developed a reputation even among Iranians for outlandish public proclamations and behavior. It is worth considering, though, that in spite of his confrontational style, Ahmadinejad was arguably just as eager to engage with the U.S. as either of his predecessors. Moreover, the Bush administration, which had previously quashed attempts at dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, reversed course and attempted to take Tehran up on its previous offers. By the end of the Bush administration, prominent public officials (Schweid 2008) from both sides of the U.S. political aisle were openly advocating direct talks with Iran, an unprecedented state of affairs.

Yet for all this promise, the period between 2005 and the end of 2009 was the most contentious episode of the relationship since U.S. and Iranian forces exchanged direct fire in the Tanker War in 1987-1988. In fact, U.S. forces battled Iranian proxies daily during operations in Iraq, and the possibility of U.S. strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities (Kaplan 2006) dominated public discussion. As with every other period so far, the U.S.-Iranian relationship involved a complex web of interconnected issues, and analysts have offered numerous explanations by taking strands in isolation. Only by examining the totality, however, do the institutional aspects emerge that tie this period to each one preceding it. Ahmadinejad's sensationalism may have gripped the headlines, but it was previous layers of conflict, fostered and developed by constituencies, that actually prevented cooperation. Constituencies took a more decisive role in this process than during the first half of the decade.

What happened?

In Iran, the hope represented by Khatami's reform movement steadily faded during the first half of the 2000's. With reformers in control of both the presidency and parliament, Iranians held them responsible for fulfilling popular expectations, especially with regard to the economy. Conservatives exploited this situation (Hunter 2014, 186-191), shifting blame and attempting to discredit their rivals, all while blocking any proposal that promised meaningful change. Reformers exacerbated their own woes by failing to develop a coherent strategy or vision, and they developed a reputation for focusing on philosophical issues instead of practical concerns. Meanwhile, a new generation of conservative leaders was developing their own platform and preparing for a grab at power.

The old guard of Iran's clerical establishment traced their fortunes to the revolution, and often to personal association with Khomeini. For the up-and-coming generation (Mousavian 2015, 201, 207-208) (Ansari 2009, 13), who dubbed themselves broadly as "principlists," the Iran-Iraq War was their

formative event, and many of these emerging leaders were veterans, especially of the IRGC. These principlists, far from being mere proteges of Khamenei, resented the grip that leaders like Rafsanjani had developed on power and wealth in Iran. In expressing their desires, they tapped into some of the same roots of popular resentment that had previously animated the reform movement, but with a stronger focus on bread and butter issues. In 2004 (Kazemzadeh 2008, 189), the Guardian Council heavily skewed the parliamentary election by disqualifying thousands of reformist candidates. Conservatives took approximately 200 of the 290 seats, with declared reform candidates only retaining 40. It is doubtful that such overt meddling was necessary for a conservative victory, but much as Rafsanjani decisively outmaneuvered the leftist clerics in 1992, Iran's hardliners now effectively sidelined the influence of reform politicians.

Ahmadinejad's victory in the June 2005 presidential election was as much a surprise to Iran's conservatives as its reformers. Ahmadinejad (Naji 2008, 3, 7-8, 32-40, 50-56, 81-86) was an engineer by training, not a cleric, and he hailed from humble beginnings, the son of a blacksmith (which he proudly leveraged in his campaign). A self-starter, he secured several administrative positions during the early days of the Islamic Republic and the Iran-Iraq War, and he served in the IRGC for two years, although possibly not in combat. After completing his PhD and serving as an engineering professor, he reentered the political arena and rose to become the Mayor of Tehran. During this time, he established his credentials as a populist, lavishing public money on popular projects, and he built his political base by appealing to the IRGC and especially Iran's large and influential Basij network. In the 2005 presidential election, Rafsanjani had positioned himself as the heir apparent of the presidency with the backing of Khamenei. Ahmadinejad's campaign harnessed popular resentment by painting Rafsanjani as the image of elite corruption, juxtaposed against a humble man of the people. With the backing of the IRGC and Basij, Ahmadinejad caught popular attention, and even Khamenei apparently endorsed his victory by the end.

In much the same manner that George W. Bush was not himself a neoconservative but came to embody the movement, Mousavian (2015, 210) argued that Ahmadinejad was not originally a principlist but a political opportunist who captured a wave of popular sentiment and made it his own. Also, like Bush, Ahmadinejad surrounded himself (Fathi 2005) with an administration dominated by ideologues, some with dubious credentials. This convergence led to a prevailing foreign policy (Mousavian 2015, 207-208) based upon the premise that Iran's previous failures in rebuilding its relationship with the West were the result of negotiating from a position of weakness. Iran needed a more confrontational approach that could inspire support from the Muslim world, and it needed a nuclear program to display its strength.

In coming to office, Ahmadinejad encountered a Bush administration that had lost some of the bluster of its early years. Contrary to early declarations of victory, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were both intensifying and consuming greater resources, and words like "quagmire" and "fiasco" were beginning to emerge in the popular press. Bush's approval ratings were declining in almost linear fashion over the course of his presidency (Gallup 2020) from a historic high, shortly after 9/11. On the other hand, Iran's economy was buoyed by higher oil prices, and America's struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan increased its leaders' sense of security, belying any neoconservative fantasies about toppling the Iranian regime after Saddam Hussein. With regard to Iran, the Bush administration was split by late 2005. On one hand, Bush (Crist 2012, 490, 496-502) signed an Iran action plan in 2005 that openly directed a public diplomacy campaign to promote democracy in Iran and undermine the hardliners. On the other hand, he dropped U.S. objections to Iran's membership in the World Trade Organization, and the NSC had a meeting in December 2005 which considered the possibility of opening a consulate in Tehran.

In this environment, and perhaps suffering from an inflated sense of self-importance, Ahmadinejad (Slackman and Fathi 2006) embarked on a spree of controversial public statements that

included threats to Israel, holocaust denial, and apocalyptic references to Shiite messianic prophecies, inciting concern not only outside Iran but also from the clerical establishment itself. Yet in spite of his rhetoric, Ahmadinejad also deliberately reached out to the U.S. in his own fashion. In May 2006, Ahmadinejad sent an 18-page letter (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2006) to President Bush, outlining Iranian grievances against the U.S., but also seemingly suggesting future cooperation. Mousavian (2015, 211, 215-216) pointed out that, even from an Iranian perspective, the letter was "naïve" and "insulting," but this was also the first time a sitting Iranian president had written an official letter to his U.S. counterpart suggesting a future relationship. Bush declined to respond, commenting afterward that Ahmadinejad was "a very strange man." This would not be the only overture offered by either side, though. Over the next two-and-a-half years three separate dramas would play out simultaneously that would directly affect the relationship between the U.S. and Iran.

The first strand of this engagement story was the shortest and least impactful, but it still made a significant difference in shaping the episode as a whole. Since the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon (Harel and Isacharoff 2008), tensions between Israel and Hezbollah (controlling much of southern Lebanon to Israel's north) had increased. In February 2005, Syria arguably overplayed its hand in Lebanon by sponsoring the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. This started a chain of events that forced a complete withdrawal of Syrian forces, and it threatened the influence of both Hezbollah and their Iranian sponsors within the country. Hezbollah, seeking to protect its reputation as a resistance force, increased its threats against Israel, and in July 2006, they kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. This sparked an extreme reaction from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government in Israel, which believed that they could use the event as a pretext for military force that would break the back of the Hezbollah threat for good. Israel started with a heavy air campaign and limited ground incursions. They graduated to a larger invasion in specific areas. Hezbollah was caught off guard by the severity of the Israeli attack, but this type of warfare played to their strengths. Far from being quickly

vanquished, they struck back with Iranian-made missiles and used guerilla tactics to produce casualties among Israeli troops. Instead of the quick, decisive campaign envisioned by Israeli leaders, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) payed a high price for its gains and produced an embarrassing amount of collateral damage, drawing the ire of the international community.

The U.S. initially blessed Israel's military action (Harel and Isacharoff 2008), adding only the reservations that it must limit damage to Lebanon's infrastructure and avoid undermining the delicate political situation in Beirut. Israel garnered support from the G-8 nations, hoping the operation would undermine Syria and Iran. As casualties mounted, however, the international community turned against Israel, and the U.S. began pressuring for a cease-fire agreement, which even Hezbollah at first claimed it would support. The problem for Israel is that its efforts had produced so few gains, Olmert felt he could not end the operation. The longer it continued, thought, the more Israel's bargaining position eroded. By the end of the 34-day war, any Israeli claim to victory was pyrrhic at best. The public relations fallout nearly toppled Olmert's government, sending his approval ratings to historic lows. Hezbollah, though bruised, claimed victory as well, as did both Syria and Iran. Harel and Isacharoff (2008, 251-258) argued that, in reality, Hezbollah lost considerable influence in the region, being painted as a proxy for Iran instead of an Arab resistance force. Iran, for its part, never planned for a war to take place when it did, and its leaders would likely have preferred to play Hezbollah's card at a more opportune moment. For the U.S., however, Hezbollah's Iranian missiles and munitions looked like proof positive that Iran was serious about Ahmadinejad's recent threats to (Slackman and Fathi 2006), "wipe Israel off the map." Israeli leaders did not fail to capitalize on this perception, and the Israeli *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict thickened, as did fears over Iran's missile program.

The second strand was the controversy over Iran's nuclear program, an ever-growing *layer* of the conflict. In a likely attempt to head off referral to the U.N. Security Council at the height of U.S. power in 2003, Iran negotiated a work plan (Mazzucelli 2007, 5-6) with the EU3 (France, Britain,

Germany) to temporarily cease its enrichment activities and pursue a negotiated settlement. It also agreed to adopt the Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), although the Parliament did not ratify this move. Preoccupied with Iraq, the U.S. acquiesced to this solution, but Iranian cooperation (El Baradei 2011, 127-129) with the EU3 and the IAEA was sporadic, and Iran clearly intended to exacerbate splits between the U.S. and Europe, which only fueled suspicion within the U.S. intelligence community. In November 2004 (Fathi 2004), Iran signed the Paris Agreement, which further codified their temporary agreement to enrich uranium, but even this was surrounded by controversy on all sides. El Baradei (2011, 141-146) argued that Iran's cooperation was intended to produce the elusive "grand bargain" with the West, but the U.S. prevented the EU3 from offering any meaningful incentives, and Iran grew frustrated. This may have been the position proffered by Iran's negotiators, but El Baradei clearly discounted the influence that constituencies were wielding in Iran.

One of Ahmadinejad's first acts (Fathi and Fuller 2005) upon assuming office in August 2005 was to announce Iran's decision to break the IAEA seals on their nuclear facilities and resume enrichment. His actual level of control over Iran's nuclear portfolio was debatable (El Baradei 2011, 254-256), as his onetime rival Ali Larijani became the public face of negotiations for the Supreme Leader, representing an opaque network of behind-the-scenes interests, but Ahmadinejad clearly intended to drive the train. Ahmadinejad (Barzegar 2009, 21) was primarily responsible for bringing the nuclear program out from behind the closed doors of Iranian internal politics and popularizing it with the Iranian people. With up to 90 percent support from the populace at times, it quickly became difficult for any Iranian leader to give ground on the issue. Just as being "soft on Iran" had become a liability in U.S. politics, Iranian politicians could no longer afford to compromise away their nuclear program.

For President Bush, preventing Iran from developing a nuclear capability was a high priority. Bush (2011, 416) later stated, "I thought about the problem in terms of two ticking clocks. One measured Iran's progress toward the bomb; the other tracked the ability of reformers to instigate

change. My objective was to slow the first clock and speed the second." In May 2006 (El Baradei 2011, 194-195), Iran delivered a message to the U.S. through IAEA Chief Mohamad El Baradei that they were interested in direct talks over the nuclear issue as well as Iraq, Afghanistan, Hezbollah and Hamas. In response (Crist 2012, 505-507), Condoleezza Rice engineered a proposal presented through the U.N. Security Council that if Iran halted enrichment and invited transparency, the U.S. would open direct talks that would allow a peaceful nuclear program and pave the way toward normal relations. This was by far the best deal that the U.S. had offered Iran, to date, and perhaps better than they had even hoped for in their 2003 "grand bargain" proposal. However, Iran refused to unilaterally halt its enrichment a second time, and the deal fell flat. Just as constituencies to the conflict had poisoned the well for Iran's original offer, they were now making concessions impossible on the Iranian side and limiting options for the U.S.

This set into motion a chain of events where the U.S. and Iran alternated between threats and negotiations on both sides. The P-5+1 (the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) superseded the EU3, and from this platform, the U.S. (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 37, 41-45) succeeded in passing three rounds of U.N. sanctions between December 2006 and March 2008. The U.S. Congress also passed two acts in 2006 directed at sanctioning Iran, ensuring that they remained relevant actors in this drama. The U.S. Treasury Department (Solomon 2016, 143-151) joined the fight against Iran as well, finding innovative ways to enforce existing sanctions and using new laws related to terrorist financing to pressure banks and businesses worldwide to stop doing business with Iran.

To further press Iran, Bush kept the possibility of military strikes on the table throughout his administration, but this was complicated (Treverton 2013, v-vi) in November 2007 by a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that stated with high confidence that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The NIE did not rule out the possibility that Iran may have restarted it, but in the politically charged environment surrounding the nuclear negotiations, this statement became a lightning rod for critics of the Bush administration's Iran policy. Bush (2011, 418-419) himself expressed

frustration in his memoirs that the controversy lowered the resolve of P-5+1 partners and reduced his administration's ability to maintain pressure on Iran. Ahmadinejad declared the NIE "a great victory" for Iran, although later intelligence reports (Solomon 2016, 128-132) would suggest that Iran had never entirely halted its weapons program at all.

The NIE controversy was followed in February 2008 by a favorable report (El Baradei 2011, 280-282) from the IAEA with regard to Iran's cooperation, which drew criticism for the IAEA from both the U.S. and Israel. Iran spun the report in its own favor, and then Ahmadinejad (Mousavian 2012, 301) fueled the conflict further in April by announcing a completely unrealistic plan to massively expand enrichment at Natanz to 6,000 centrifuges, a clear sop to his own domestic base. In a final effort make progress on the issue before the end of his administration (Crist 2012, 509), Bush offered Iran a "freeze for freeze" incentive package through the P-5+1 in July 2008. This would have suspended sanctions against Iran merely for a promise to halt further expansion of Iran's program, an opportunity to talk. Iran turned this offer down, as well. The nuclear *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship could hardly have thickened more in this space of time.

The third strand that operated concurrently during the second half of the Bush administration was Iran's proxy war against U.S. forces in Iraq, a new *layer* to the existing conflict. Iran had been developing Shiite resistance (Rayburn, et al. 2019a, 187-188, 269-270) networks in Iraq for many years prior to the U.S. decision to invade. When the U.S. invaded, they had already started activating those networks to undermine Saddam Hussein and build Iranian influence. After the fall of the Baathist government, Iranian agents of various stripes went on a buying spree in Baghdad and southern Iraq, reportedly purchasing (O'Hern 2008, 103) as many as 5,000 homes and businesses, so many that it produced a bubble in the real estate market. Through this network, the IRGC and the MOIS began arming and directing Shiite militias, first to assassinate former Baathists, but then to defend Shiite interests in Iraq. They also began infiltrating the fledgling police and military forces, along with every

echelon of the new Iraqi government. Shiite militias bided their time at first, expecting democracy to work in their interest as the largest confessional group in Iraq.

One group in particular was not content to wait, though. The Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) (Rayburn, et al. 2019a, 391-392), led by Moqtada al-Sadr, incited major uprisings across southern Iraq throughout 2004, especially in Karbala and Najaf. The JAM initially held Iran at arms' length and refused their direction and support, but open battles with coalition forces depleted their combat power. By the end of the year, Sadr and his militia changed course and began looking to Tehran, especially as sectarian violence between the Sunni's and Shiites ramped up. JAM started becoming one of Iran's most valuable clients.

Between 2003 and 2005, Iran kept its proxy war against the U.S. at a low boil (Crist 2012, 518-519), not overtly rocking the boat. However, by the time of Ahmadinejad's election, Iranian leaders had already decided to turn up the heat. Coalition forces (O'Hern 2008, 86-89) began taking increased casualties, especially from a new and more effective style of Improvised Explosive Device (IED), the Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP). U.S. intelligence and special operations soldiers started tracing EFP's back to Iran as early as mid-2005 and uncovering evidence of a full-scale proxy war by the end of the year. This started an uphill battle for tactical commanders concerned about the Iranian threat. First, coalition commanders (Crist 2012, 513, 524) were concerned about undermining Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq's Shiite Prime Minister, who generally vetoed operations against Shiite targets. Just as importantly, though, the Pentagon's initial strategy had been to draw down forces in Iraq as quickly as possible, but with sectarian violence on the rise, the country appeared to be coming apart at the seams.

The Bush administration (Rayburn, et al. 2019a, 572-575) spent much of 2006 examining various assessments of a way forward. Iran's increasing bellicosity was troubling, but few senior commanders or policymakers (O'Hern 2008, 90-93) were prepared to escalate with Iran while trying to develop an exit

strategy. Iranian agents (Solomon 2016, 70-71) built their networks with relative impunity under the personal direction of Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Qassim Soleimani, who established mechanisms of control similar to a mafia throughout Iraq. Intelligence would later confirm reports (Ware 2005) that Iran also developed a sophisticated ratline that moved militia recruits from Iraq, through Iran and Syria, to Lebanon for training in Lebanese Hezbollah camps.

Only in September 2006 did the U.S. get serious about countering Iran's proxy warfare in Iraq. The coalition (Crist 2012, 525-527) developed a new Special Operations task force with a specific mandate to target Shiite militias and their Iranian sponsors. They started conducting a series of aggressive raids (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 73-74) at the end of 2006, and a January raid in Erbil captured five IRGC officers. The Iranians reacted furiously, claiming that they were diplomats, but the U.S. interrogated them and held them prisoner until the withdrawal of coalition forces. In retaliation, the Iranians directly sponsored a sophisticated militia raid on a coalition compound later that month in Karbala, killing five American soldiers. Coalition forces then hunted and killed the perpetrators.

In February 2007, Bush (Crist 2012, 530-532) publicly put the Iranian government on notice about its operations in Iraq, threatening to "deal with" any Iranian agents found in the country. In October 2007, Bush also issued an Executive Order that designated the Quds force a supporter of terrorism and the IRGC as a proliferator of WMD. This allowed the Treasury Department to apply sanctions. Further, Bush's late 2006 decision to "surge" in Iraq, along with his appointment of General David Petraeus as the coalition commander changed the command posture with regard to Iran. In July 2007 (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 225-226) Petraeus began a series of press releases that for the first time publicly articulated the U.S. case against Iran in a comprehensive manner. Confronting his rival, Petraeus (Solomon 2016, 79-81) and exchanged messages directly with Soleimani on several occasions in 2007 and 2008. In one exchange, Petraeus gave Soleimani an ultimatum not to use a particular

weapon, referred to as an IRAM, and Iran refrained from doing so, apparently respecting Petraeus's resolve.

While the nuclear issue had yet to produce a bilateral meeting between the U.S. and Iran, the war in Iraq did. In late 2006 (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 226-227) (Crist 2012, 533-535), perhaps in response to increased U.S. pressure, Iran offered to talk with the U.S. in Iraq. Ambassador Ryan Crocker met an Iranian counterpart in Baghdad in May and July 2007, but the discussions made no headway. Both sides simply accused each other, and it was not apparent that the Iranian representative was empowered to offer any significant concessions. In August 2007, Soleimani asserted his authority by sending a message directly to Petraeus, claiming that he was the sole decision-maker for Iran's activities in Iraq, an apparent attempt to undermine the authority of the Baghdad talks. The official U.S. Army history of the Iraq War (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 227) speculated that the December 2007 NIE on Iran's nuclear program was nail in the coffin for any future talks. An emboldened Iran saw no need to return to the table.

Crist (2012, 536) argued that Soleimani overplayed his hand, as Iranian sponsored groups battled each other in Basra that winter, prompting Maliki to finally initiate military action to retake the city. Tellingly, the battle of Basra (O'Hern 2008, 109-110) was ultimately decided, not in Iraq, but by Soleimani's mediation among the warring parties at a meeting in Iran. Overall, Iran's proxy war against the U.S. in Iraq added a new and potent *layer* to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The Pentagon (Rempfer 2019) eventually attributed 603 U.S. combat deaths to Iran throughout the war. A generation too young to remember the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, and in some cases even Khobar Towers, could loudly proclaim that Iran had U.S. blood on its hands.

Again, while the relationship between the U.S. and Iran became more contentious throughout this period, it was also characterized by abortive attempts on both sides to better relations. Frustratingly, concessions by both sides always appeared to come in a disjointed fashion – too little, too

late. As the next section will elaborate, thought, this was not simply another tragic spate of bad luck for the U.S. and Iran. Constituencies were shaping events, ensuring that any peaceful overture would always be a non-starter, regardless of how promising it may have seemed.

The institutional development of constituencies

The overlapping period of the presidencies of George W. Bush in the U.S. and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran was relatively rich in factors that helped to institutionalize the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. As with other periods under study, both sides made at least some effort to bridge the gap. Unlike the early Bush years, where Iran was the primary supplicant, or the late Clinton years, where the U.S. took a more active role in seeking rapprochement, this episode was more evenly matched. The U.S. and Iran both seemed to understand the value of direct talks, along with the costs of continuing conflict, but neither side proved willing to make significant concessions. Meanwhile, constituencies to the conflict continued to make it unlikely that either side would change course. Each of the constituencies demonstrated *layering* and *drift* which added considerable depth to the conflict and helped translate it to a new generation.

Iran's clerical establishment, as a conservative structure of power, was going through significant changes that impacted relations with the U.S. and demonstrated the institutional process of *drift*. To begin with, it was becoming less clerical. Khomeini's inner circle, which formed the initial core of leadership under the Islamic republic, consisted primarily of clerics or individuals with close ties to clerics. However, Khomeini (Khalaji 2010) did not speak for Shiite Islam as a whole. Khomeini had steamrolled or sidelined a significant portion of the clerical hierarchy that disagreed with his views, and he essentially banished them to Qom. Khamenei did not succeed Khomeini because there were no

other ayatollahs available. The leaders of the Islamic Republic represented a splinter from the mainstream, which continued to operate quietly in the background but could not be trusted to carry on *valayat-e faqih*. This problem became worse over time for Khamenei. Khomeini's system developed proteges, but it did not produce a generation of viable successors that had both the popular support and religious clout to develop legitimacy. This meant that the upcoming generation was even more beholden to the pillars established by their forebears, especially the U.S.-Iran conflict. Without this perennial sense of external threat, a revolution that occurred before most citizens of the country were born offered a thin mandate for rule by this class.

Khamenei (Vatanka 2019) also found himself increasingly reliant on the IRGC and clerical security forces as his base of power. A network of senior commanders and veterans, forged by the Iran-Iraq War instead of the Islamic Revolution, was claiming its place in Iranian political and economic life. The good news for Khamenei was that these up-and-comers, including Ahmadinejad's principlist supporters, relied on the framework of the Islamic Republic and *valayat-e faqih* for their own power and legitimacy, so they had a stake in the system. The IRGC continued to be one of Iran's few vehicles for social mobility, but the status it offered was inherently linked to the power of the organization and its networks. With their own stake in the confrontation between the U.S. and Iran and leverage over Khamenei, he now had to balance and account for their views. By the middle of the decade, the effects of this long-term change became visible and salient. A new cast of characters had taken the U.S.-Iranian conflict and made it their own, making it harder for the old guard to reverse course if they wanted to.

Iran's clerical establishment also demonstrated the process of *layering* in two distinct but related areas. The first was a new domestic political situation in Iran. By sidelining the reformers in 2004 and 2005 (Hunter 2014, 208), the hardliners could declare victory, but with no rival, the divisions within the clerical establishment now became starker as insiders competed for influence. This had a perverse influence on the U.S.-Iranian relationship because rapprochement with the West, especially

involving the nuclear program, was popular with the Iranian population, and it was considered a political prize. El Baradei (2011, 198-199) brought out that in the summer of 2006, when the EU-3 had offered Iran a generous compromise for ceasing its uranium enrichment, it was the pragmatist conservative Hassan Rouhani (who had previously served as Iran's nuclear negotiator under Khatami and would later become president) who led the way in obstructing Iran's acceptance of the deal. Rouhani and his supporters did not object to the terms at all, but they did not want to allow Ahmadinejad to be able to take credit for the deal and become a "national hero."

While Iran dithered, the U.S. referred it to the U.N. Security Council. As they probably planned all along, Ahmadinejad's rivals publicly blamed him (Staff Writer 2007) (Khalaji 2007) for mishandling the nuclear issue (among other key grievances) when the Security Council approved sanctions in the coming months. Khamenei (Esfandiari 2007) rebuked Ahmadinejad and advised him to be quiet on the nuclear issue and leave it to those responsible, an open attempt to wrest political initiative from the bombastic president. This domestic squabble allowed the already contentious nuclear negotiations to enter years of stalemate and sanctions, making the nuclear *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict thicker at every turn. Iranian politics directly scuttled a deal that would have reduced hostility and provided the country a significant win on the international stage, and a constituency led this effort. In institutional terms, this episode also helped to refresh and renew the clerical establishment as a constituency to the conflict, maximizing the participation of Iran’s power brokers.

The second and related aspect of *layering* was a change in the way the nuclear issue was treated in Iran. Before the 2002 revelations brought international attention to Iran's nuclear program, this was a matter that for the most part was handled quietly by regime insiders. After 2002, regime hardliners marketed the program to average Iranians as a matter of national pride. As previously mentioned, it was Ahmadinejad who really made the nuclear program popular with the Iranian people, tying it into a platform of populism and social justice. This fundamentally transformed the value of the program to

Iran's clerical establishment. Whereas before it was a bargaining chip they could use to achieve other goals, over time it became (El Baradei 2011, 135) the "jewel in Tehran's crown." This evolution added a new *layer* of depth to the already potent nuclear *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, making compromise harder on both sides and increasing path dependency. By the time the Bush administration offered meaningful concessions in 2006, it was the constituencies in Iran that had taken the reigns regarding this issue set.

The IRGC and clerical security forces were probably the most instrumental constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict during this period, demonstrating *drift*, *displacement and conversion*, and *layering*. In terms of *drift*, the IRGC matured considerably since the Iran-Iraq War. Not only had it grown to dominate Iran's national security establishment (Takeyh 2016), but its tentacles extended throughout the economic and political realms, as well. While its leadership had their roots in the Iran-Iraq War and the struggles of the 1980's, by Ahmadinejad's presidency most of its rank-in-file had little or no memory of either the war or the formation of Hezbollah. The Quds Force Commander, Qassim Soleimani (Filkins 2013), a hero of the Iran-Iraq War, came to embody the image of a modern, seasoned, and aggressive force. Soleimani has been described as a man who was not particularly religious but was intensely driven by Iranian nationalism. His motivation for confronting the U.S. was not the protection of a clerical regime or even the export of a revolution, but an Iranian sense of manifest destiny within the Middle East. Soleimani's influence within Iranian foreign policy began a stark upward trajectory as soon as the U.S. became engaged in Iraq, and he dragged subordinates in his wake. By the time Petraeus took command of the coalition in Iraq, Soleimani was openly asserting his dominance as Iran's chief player in the conflict. In 2007 (Rayburn, et al. 2019b, 226-227), he deliberately undermined the only face-to-face talks that the U.S. conducted with Iran during this period, the Baghdad talks that apparently failed to meet with his approval. Rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran had a new set of enemies

from within the same organization, each clambering to make a name for themselves in the circles of Iran's elite.

The IRGC also demonstrated *displacement and conversion* after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The IRGC had been supporting Hezbollah for years, and while the showdown did not erupt in the manner of Iran's choosing, their proxy force demonstrated that it could damage Israel. The problem for Iran, however, was that Hezbollah spent itself tactically and politically in the effort. The Iranians maintained their foothold in Lebanon, but this was no longer the center of gravity in efforts to export the revolution. As Lebanon cooled down, Iraq became the place to be for aggressive Quds Force operatives looking to make their mark (Afghanistan was another possibility, but Shiites were a minority, and the insurgency was driven by the Sunni Taliban, which Iran was loathe to partner with). Iraq was fertile ground for the advancement of IRGC interests on multiple fronts, and there was no way for this not to exacerbate the conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

In terms of adding *layers* to the conflict, the IRGC and clerical security forces were also busy at work. They were directly responsible for the proxy war in Iraq. They fostered and developed business interests of their own in Iraq, necessitating political influence over the country. Their support to Hezbollah thickened the Israeli *layer* of the conflict. The IRGC also advanced Iran's nuclear program. Regardless of Khamenei's proclamations that these devices were un-Islamic, the IRGC had a clear interest in developing a nuclear weapon and little oversight to prevent it. Even if Iran's negotiators truly believed that their country would never develop a nuclear weapon, there was always a shadow of doubt that the IRGC might be doing something without their knowledge. Indeed, intelligence reports (Solomon 2016, 128-132) suggested that this was likely the case, at least to some degree. Indeed, IRGC officers were frequently rewarded for taking initiative (Lyall, et al. 2007) that exceeded their brief. One example was the March 2007 capture of 15 British sailors in the disputed border region of the Shat al-

Arab. The commander acted without orders, causing an international incident with Britain, but Ahmadinejad made a propaganda exercise out of it and rewarded him for his efforts.

Unlike the IRGC, CENTCOM might be described as a reluctant constituency in this episode of the drama, but their moves in reaction to Iranian threats also thickened *layer* of the conflict and invested the command in hostility against Iran. Some U.S. commanders, fixated on the growing challenges of unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, preferred not to antagonize Iran. CENTCOM Commander from 2003 to 2007 General John Abizaid (Crist 2012, 532) consistently argued against escalatory measures, although he favored a containment approach. His replacement, Admiral William "Fox" Fallon was even more ambivalent about Iran. These preferences, however, mattered little on the ground in Iraq, where U.S. soldiers were dying at the hands of Iranian proxies. Before the summer of 2006, U.S. commanders in Iraq willfully downplayed Iran's escalating proxy war, not because they did not prefer to fight back, but because a new front with Iran did not fit the strategic constraints under which they operated. This is an important point in itself because U.S. inaction likely encouraged Soleimani to increase his own efforts, and his untrammeled success in turn gave him wider latitude with Tehran to shape Iraq as he saw fit. This was not the first time that a U.S. failure to retaliate fostered greater aggression by the Iranians (Reagan's restraint in Lebanon being another prime example). This also demonstrates that constituencies to a conflict can feed directly off each other's actions (or inaction) whether they are intentional or not and thicken *layers* of the conflict. The final chapter of this dissertation will discuss the institutional implications of this dynamic in greater depth.

This state of affairs was not going to last forever. To his credit, Bush personally decided on a bold new strategy for Iraq and appointed a bold commander to execute it for him (not to denigrate any who came before him, but General Petraeus had a unique sense of vision with regard to executing the "surge"). Even before the "surge," the creation of a Special Operations Task Force specifically focused on Iran was highly significant. This may have been a temporary solution at first, but success is rarely

wasted, and one could argue that this was the beginning of a new institution. The Special Operations units led by Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal (see McChrystal 2013, 33-36, 250-253) fundamentally changed the way U.S. forces fought against all manner of asymmetric warfare threats, and Iran's role in spurring this evolution would not be forgotten in the coming years.. This combined with Petraeus's hardline approach toward the Iranian threat on the conventional side. The tactic with the greatest long-term significance was simply calling out Iran publicly (Byman 2007) on what they were doing. Iran could (and did) deny everything, but under Petraeus, the U.S. made a solid, evidence-based case to the U.S. public and the world that Iran was fueling the insurgency in Iraq. The Iraq *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict was no longer a matter of speculation or a hidden grudge match between combatants on a battlefield; it became a matter for public consumption and debate in the U.S. and Iran and fuel for new narratives on both sides.

Unlike CENTCOM, Israel displayed no reluctance in furthering their constituency to the U.S.-Iranian conflict and thickening both the Israeli and nuclear weapons *layers*. In May 2006 (Erlanger 2006) Ehud Olmert addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress, only the third Israeli Prime Minister to do so, and his message was primarily an admonishment to help defend Israel from the Iranian threat. Less than two months afterward, Israel conducted its 34-day war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. If the Iraq War was a "fiasco" (reference to Ricks 2006) for the U.S., the Lebanon war was a much shorter version of the same for Israel, even though it claimed victory. While the war was originally about Hezbollah and not Iran, per se, Ram (2009, 82-86) argued that the Israeli leadership had to double down on selling the Iranian threat in order to justify the operation, which had hurt them domestically and strained relations with the U.S. They did this primarily through AIPAC (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 298, 301), which spent 2007 pushing unsuccessfully for stronger sanctions legislation from Congress and very successfully campaigning to prevent the inclusion of a prohibition in the defense appropriations bill that would have required Bush to seek Congressional approval before any military strike on Iran. Israel did not want the

U.S. to take the military option off the table, and they also pressured the Bush administration by continually implying that they might strike Iran on their own if the U.S. did not - a course of action that could have destabilized the entire region.

After Mearsheimer and Walt's (2007) book went to the publisher, Israel proved this assessment again in September 2007 (Holmes 2018) by destroying a Syrian nuclear facility partly sponsored by Iran. Olmert personally asked Bush for the U.S. to conduct the strike themselves, but Bush declined. However, Bush's (2010, 421-422) memoirs expressed no surprise that Israel conducted the strike, and he stated that intelligence gathered after the fact pointed to the likelihood of use for a weapons program. Bush stated that the strike, "made up for the confidence I had lost in the Israelis during the Lebanon war," potentially suggesting that he had conveyed tacit approval all along. Ultimately, the Israeli government needed Iran's hostility to support its own political narrative, and there was no diplomatic solution between the U.S. and Iran that Israel was willing support during this episode.

The only less active constituency of this period was the U.S. Congress. Their constituency remained fully intact, but Congress was distracted by domestic issues that temporarily reduced their focus on Iran. To begin with, Congress had less of a role to play during this period. By 2006 (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 37, 41-45) (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 298) they had already tightened unilateral sanctions to the point where further measures would have put the U.S. in direct conflict with its allies. The most obvious room for maneuver against Iran now lay with the Bush administration (especially the Treasury Department) and the U.N. Security Council.

Just as importantly, though, Bush's approval ratings (Gallup 2020) continued their steady descent throughout the second half of his presidency, due largely to the unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. After years of scathing criticism from political opponents over the decision process for invading Iraq, the term "preemption" had become a virtual swear word in many circles (the reason that

Congress considered reining in Bush's power to authorize strikes on Iran's nuclear program). It was not that the U.S. public was warming up to Iran or failed to appreciate a potential threat, but the tide of popular opinion was looking for a different approach to foreign policy, and both sides of the aisle were sensitive to this as the 2008 elections approached. Most of the Democratic candidates for President and almost half of the Republicans were hailing from seats in Congress prior to the election.

Tellingly, the major presidential candidates all promised to protect Israel and believed that Iran could not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 295), but this is where they started to diverge from the increasingly unpopular incumbent. John McCain (Sturm 2008) represented the hardline Republican view most aligned with Bush, that the U.S. should isolate Iran, keeping the threat of military force in play, although he avoided escalatory rhetoric. Democrat Hillary Clinton suggested that the U.S. should engage with Iran directly, but she hedged her bets by taking a hard line (Morgan 2008) and threatening to "obliterate" Iran if it attacked Israel with a nuclear weapon.

Democrat Barrack Obama (Sturm 2008) successfully juxtaposed himself against the Bush administration by arguing for a renewed campaign of diplomacy and engagement, and this tied into his overall narrative of "hope" which carried into his presidential campaign. His running mate, Senator Joe Biden (El Baradei 2011, 264) (Memoli 2019) was one of few lawmakers with a long history of supporting engagement, and Biden's views found their moment. The point of this section is not to provide an analysis of the 2008 presidential election, but to show that the U.S. Congress viewed Iran almost entirely through the prism of the domestic political struggle during the later years of the Bush administration. However, the same motivations which temporarily haltered Congressional animosity against Iran also laid the groundwork for it to return with a vengeance after Obama’s victory in 2009. Iran would still be the weapon of choice in future domestic battles, and the institution of animosity against Iran weathered this temporary blip in the political landscape unscathed.

Conclusion

In their own ways, both the U.S. and Iran tried harder at rapprochement during the 2000's than they did during the 1990's. A negotiating pattern that began to emerge a decade before was becoming a prominent fixture. The opponent who saw themself in the weaker position made an offer or a gesture that should have appealed to the other opponent. The stronger opponent, instead of accepting victory, held out for more and perpetuated the conflict. Then both sides switched roles. Game theory might offer additional insights into such behavior, but institutional theory suggests a straightforward explanation. Neither side *really* wanted the conflict to end. Concessions were short-term tactical moves allowed by constituencies on one side when their interests were temporarily distracted from the opposing side. Rejection was an outward demonstration that constituencies on the other side still saw their long-term interest tied to the conflict, and no reasonable concession was actually going to be enough to change this fact. As the concluding chapter will discuss, this phenomenon provides another compelling explanation why "interest mapping" has rarely, if ever, held the keys to conflict resolution. There are a potentially infinite number of drivers for institutional change, but without altering the institutional dynamics of a conflict, the puzzle will never be solved.

The 2000's started with two decades worth of accumulated institutional baggage and then added its own. Iran took the terrorism layer and added support for Hamas, harboring al-Qaeda fugitives, support for Hezbollah that included a small war against Israel, and a proxy war in Iraq. It transformed the nuclear *layer* from relatively minor bone of contention to an impasse with most of the free world. The U.S. surrounded Israel militarily on two sides and offered them little to no stake in the future of their neighbors. Just as George H. W. Bush broke his promise to Iran with regard to "goodwill," his son broke his promise with regard to the MEK. The U.S. used human rights arguments to undermine Iran's leadership, supported by a neoconservative ideology every bit as questionable as *valayat-e faqih*. The layers of domestic politics that undermined rapprochement in the 1990's transformed into new

layers that continued the same pattern a decade later. Some of the constituencies exhibited *displacement and conversion* in their development over time, but usually in a manner that served to perpetuate the conflict. All of the constituencies exhibited *drift* as key personalities changed over time but investment in the conflict remained.

Yet for all this entrenchment, each decade of the conflict promised a new beginning. The Iranians clung to their hope in the possibility of a "grand bargain." The U.S., worn down from years of overseas adventurism, elected a new president who promised to reorient American foreign policy. The Obama era was about to begin.

CHAPTER 6 - THE FOURTH DECADE, 2009-2018

The third decade of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran saw the torch of animosity passed from one generation to the next, and stoked by hardline conservative governments in both countries, that torch burned as brightly as ever by the end of the Bush administration. However, both the U.S. and Iran had compelling national interests in coming to terms with each other. Iran remained internationally isolated; its economy buoyed by oil sales but vulnerable to market fluctuations. Its nuclear program offered a key bargaining chip, but unless Iranian leaders came to the negotiating table, it carried no value. In many respects, the program actually increased Iran's insecurity in the face of international pressure, and the cost of holding this chip rose over time. The U.S., on the other hand, had largely squandered its "unipolar moment" as the sole world superpower, becoming bogged down in two very costly wars with little end in sight. Hawkish politicians spoke rashly about possible military action against Iran, but in reality, the U.S. public had little appetite for a new war in the Middle East. When Barrack Obama was elected president in 2008, the populations on both sides breathed a sigh of relief, hoping for a negotiated solution. Even the brash Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seemed ready to make a deal. Such was the mood as the Islamic Republic turned 30.

As with any good story, this narrative could take multiple approaches. For the fourth decade of the relationship between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic, one could focus on the Obama administration, a tragedy perhaps. This would be a story of great expectations stymied along the way. But then, with a combination of great perseverance and political savvy, Obama engineered a historic nuclear agreement, paving the way for the end of a decades-long conflict. Unfortunately, the villains come afterward and undo his great achievement, damning the two societies to perpetual enmity. Alternatively, one could focus on the Iranian regime and follow the story of Ahmadinejad's bid for personal power, interrupting the progress of diplomacy but coming to an ignominious end in 2013.

Instead, one could trace the story of Khamenei, struggling to maintain his own power and ensure that Khomeini's legacy lived on in an enduring Islamic Republic. In this context, the nuclear agreement implemented in 2016 seems less like a triumph and more like a tactical concession, made in the name of expediency. One might even take Khamenei's own view and explain how the duplicitous United States was fundamentally incapable of treating Iran with respect and honoring its own commitments. The list could continue, but none of these narratives provides a complete picture of the conflict.

Following the pattern of previous decades, this chapter will use an institutional lens to narrate the story. The first episode, covering Obama's first term in office, will show how constituencies to the conflict, shaped by the operation of institutional mechanisms over the course of decades, dashed the hopes for reconciliation that Obama carried with him into office in 2009. The second episode, corresponding roughly with the beginning of Obama's second term to the full implementation of the nuclear agreement in 2016, will be more complicated. On one hand, the failure of the U.S. and Iran to cooperate in the fight against ISIS was entirely consistent with the pattern of three and half decades. On the other, the nuclear agreement was a historic break in the paradigm of the relationship. This chapter will discuss how this development constituted a victory over the power of constituencies, perhaps even challenging the concept of institutional animosity. The victory was short-lived, though, and the third episode, which saw the election of President Trump in 2016, will end with the abrogation of the nuclear agreement in 2018 and the immediate aftermath of this event, a triumph for the seemingly defeated constituencies and a testament to the endurance of institutional forces. Throughout the story, constituencies to the conflict evolved by the processes of *displacement and conversion*, *layering*, and *drift*, thickening and advancing the conflict, even in the most hopeful moments.

Obama's 'Open Hand'

The election of Senator Barrack Obama to the presidency in November 2008 ushered in a new era of possibility for the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Obama campaigned for the presidency on a platform in which he portrayed himself as the polar opposite of his predecessor, George W. Bush. Instead of a unilateral, "you are either with us or against us" (CNN 2001) approach, Obama advocated multilateralism (Zeleny and Kulish 2008), and he believed that American leadership would only be effective in partnership with allies and international bodies like the United Nations. This appealed to large segments of the American population that were disaffected by the seemingly stalemated wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who had become allergic to the proposition that the U.S. might start another preemptive war with a country like Iran. With regard to Iran, Obama (Luo 2008) believed that the U.S. had yet to make a sincere attempt at engagement, and this was a vital first step toward any resolution of the conflict, especially over Iran's nuclear program.

Obama was not as dovish as his opponents sometimes claimed, and he had actually sponsored a bill in the Senate (Maloney 2015, 464-465) in 2007 that became the basis for sanctions he ultimately signed into law in 2010. Although Obama's patience was not unlimited, he believed (Solomon 2016, 174) that a sincere attempt at diplomacy would help the U.S. unite the international community against Iran if additional pressure were required. His presidential campaign and the early days of his administration prompted a spate of optimistic literature advocating varying degrees of engagement with Iran (see (Maloney 2008), (Kinzer 2010), (Parasiliti 2010)). The core of U.S. interests in the Middle East during this period centered around the prevention of nuclear proliferation and the containment of Islamic extremism, both of which would have been far less difficult and expensive in cooperation with Iran than in competition. On the Iranian side, Ahmadinejad seemed even more eager for negotiations with the U.S. than he had been at the beginning of his term, and while three years in office had not

dampened his ambitions, they had tempered some of his more controversial impulses. Iran's population would have welcomed the economic benefits of international engagement, as well as the prestige of being recognized by the U.S. and its partners as a legitimate regional power.

Instead of comprehensive engagement, by 2012, the U.S. and Iran were as far apart as they had ever been. The international community was in the process of imposing one of the most comprehensive and innovative sanctions regimes in modern history against Iran, and publics on both sides again braced for the possibility of U.S. military action. For the Iranians, their prized nuclear program produced no tangible benefits for the people and left their country economically strained and even more internationally isolated than during the Iran-Iraq War. For the U.S, the short-term costs seemed minimal, but Vali Nasr (2013, 122) argued that the U.S. paid a significant strategic price by ceding political ground to its up-and-coming great power rivals, China and Russia, in return for their support. If Iran and the U.S. had cooperated, Iran could have kept a significant portion of their civilian nuclear program, cost-free, and Obama's "pivot to Asia" (see Shambaugh 2013) might have had a greater impact in shaping China's rise. This section will show that constituencies on both sides helped restrict the room for productive diplomacy and perpetuate the conflict, thickening *layers* of institutional animosity.

What happened?

The first several months of the Obama administration appeared promising for relations with Iran, as Obama established his new foreign policy priorities. Shortly after his electoral victory in November 2008, Ahmadinejad (Erdbrink 2008) sent him a congratulatory letter, suggesting that Iran would welcome, "major, fair and real changes, in policies and actions, especially in this region." While not devoid of rhetorical lecturing, Mousavian (2015, 224) made the point that this was the first

"complimentary" letter sent directly by a sitting Iranian president to his American counterpart. Obama did not respond to the letter, but he initiated a series of overtures toward Iran upon taking office. His administration (Solomon 2016, 178) rolled back some of the Bush-era democracy promotion initiatives that the Iranian government found offensive, arguing that they were of dubious value to begin with. In March 2009 (Clinton 2014, 422), the U.S. indirectly invited Iran to participate at an international conference in the Hague on Afghanistan, and they sent a representative. Several months later (Voice of America 2009), the State Department sent invitations to Iranian counterparts at embassies around the world, inviting them to take part in U.S. Independence Day celebrations, although it would rescind those invitations in the wake of the June 2009 election controversy in Tehran.

More directly, Obama (2009) recorded a congratulatory video to the Iranian people celebrating the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*) in March 2009. His message, broadcast by television and the internet, avoided most of the inflammatory language typical of previous messaging and offered a "new beginning," but it still cautioned Iran against supporting "terror" or attempting to build "arms." As in previous cases, Khamenei's response (Mousavian 2015, 225) focused almost entirely on these negative aspects of the speech. He called Obama's approach an "iron hand" in a "velvet glove" and stated that, "our nation… hates [the policy of] threat and enticement." Undaunted, Obama (Burns 2019, 348) sent a personal letter to Khamenei (bypassing Ahmadinejad) through the Swiss in May 2009, offering direct engagement. Khamenei responded promptly, and while the exchange has not been published, Mousavian (2015, 226) described the Supreme Leader's return letter as cordial. He explained Iran's grievances but, aware of the tide of public sentiment in his own country, expressed a willingness to work together in and attitude of mutual respect. Obama (Washington Times 2009) sent a second letter in early June, but events interrupted the momentum of this promising exchange. The human rights *layer*, added to the U.S.-Iranian conflict under Khatami, was about to reemerge in a new and energized form.

Iran's June 2009 presidential election became another watershed moment in the history of the Islamic Republic. By June (Abootalebi 2009, 5-8), the race boiled down to two viable candidates. The incumbent, Ahmadinejad, retained a considerable base of support despite his controversial policies. His leading challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi, led a resurgent strand of Khatami's reformists that would brand themselves as the "Green Movement" in the wake of the election. Significantly, the debates (Axworthy 2013, 401-402) leading up to the election were conducted in a Western-style format and were unusually candid, revealing regime dirty laundry like corruption far more openly than in any previous contest, piquing public interest. On the day of the election, Mousavi (Rieffer-Flanagan 2013, 99-101) prematurely declared victory, based on dubious evidence. The government, possibly spooked by this claim, quickly responded by calling the results in favor of Ahmadinejad, with 62.8 percent of the vote (more than enough to prevent a runoff election). This almost immediately led to claims of fraud by Mousavi's supporters and sparked a wave of protests across Iran, reportedly reaching as high as 3 million participants in the following week. On June 19, Khamenei (Abootalebi 2009, 8-9) (Erdbrink and Branigan 2009) openly sided with Ahmadinejad in a speech during Friday prayers, demanding that Iranians return to their homes and supporting crackdowns on continued descent. The Supreme Leader accepted that there may have been some fraudulent activity, but he claimed that it was simply impossible to fabricate the required 11 million votes under the Islamic Republic.

The emergent Green Movement (Axworthy 2013, 404-406) continued to sponsor protests regularly for the first month, then sporadically through the fall and into early 2010. In some cases, they coopted events that had been officially sponsored by the government, such as a December 2009 commemoration of the Shiite holiday Ashura. For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, chants directed against the Supreme Leader himself became pervasive. The Iranian government (Hunter 2014, 213, 217-218) blamed the unrest on Western plots and described it as a U.S. attempt to foment a color revolution. Open support for the Green Movement from expatriate dissident groups like the

Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) and son of the former Shah (Majd 2010, 55) only provided grist for these conspiracy theories. While displaying what some have described as surprising restraint, Iranian security forces (Rieffer-Flanagan 2013, 99-104, 124) nevertheless employed a considerable amount of repression, killing approximately 200 protestors in the first month and imprisoning over 4,000, with thousands more to follow in the coming months. Many of those jailed were reportedly subjected to beatings, torture or rape, and hundreds were tried in kangaroo courts on ill-defined charges and sentenced to prison terms. In February 2011, the government placed Mousavi, along with his wife, under house arrest.

A detailed examination of the controversy surrounding the 2009 election is beyond the scope of this work. As Hunter (2014, 214-216) outlined, there were irregularities with the election that warranted suspicion, but there was also evidence suggesting that Ahmadinejad was the legitimate victor, in spite of any tampering that may have occurred. In the West, however, and especially in the U.S., the verdict was almost unanimous that the election had been blatantly rigged and that the Green Movement was a popular uprising against clerical rule in Iran. Leverett and Leverett (2013, 229-272) provided one of the most comprehensive critical views of this position available in Western literature. They argued that not only were claims of electoral fraud based on blatantly false information that was uncritically accepted by the Western media, but the Green Movement itself drew from a relatively small base of support that tapped into the emotion of a very unique moment in Iranian history. They never mounted a viable threat or alternative (see Majd (2010, 54)) to the system in Iran, and it was not repression that defeated them. When public emotion faded, the Green Movement simply collapsed under its own weight.

Significant to this dissertation, Leverett and Leverett (2013, 229-232) argued that the U.S. suffered from a "tyranny of expectations" with regard to Iran. The human rights *layer* of the conflict had

created several popular illusions. The first was that the regime was brittle and subject to overthrow at any time by a popular uprising. Second, the Ahmadinejad and other conservatives did not have popular support in Iran. Third, U.S. observers painted the Green Movement in their own image, liberal human-rights advocates seeking to install Western-style democracy and rejoin the world community. In short, the West saw what it wanted to see when it looked at Iran's elections and the Green movement, and this blinded it to what was (and was not) really taking place. For years, U.S. perceptions regarding Iran had been shaped and molded by constituencies to the conflict that were intent upon building a popular narrative that recalled years of grievances instead of objectively assessing current conditions.

This activation of the human rights *layer* placed the Obama administration between a rock and hard place. On one hand, Obama was compelled by popular opinion to support this burgeoning democracy movement against the oppression of Iran's clerical regime. On the other, many worried (Clinton 2014, 423) that blatant American support would undermine the Green Movement domestically. This dilemma aside, opponents of engagement had new ammunition to advocate for a policy of regime change in Iran instead of negotiating with a dictatorial regime that appeared to be on the ropes. Regime change was a favorite mantra of the constituencies to the conflict because it precluded compromise with Iran, prevented U.S. leaders from granting any legitimacy to the Islamic Republic, and virtually ensured that conflict would continue unabated. Obama stayed quiet for the most part (a policy for which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2014, 424) later expressed regret), but when he did speak out against the violence two weeks after the election (Slavin 2009), his remarks drew immediate criticism from Khamenei, who pointed out that Obama's tone completely contradicted the letters he had previously sent.

Meanwhile, the State Department (Clinton 2014, 424) (Crist 2012, 522, 547) worked with technology companies like Twitter to help ensure internet access for Iranian dissidents and promoted

technology to help Iranians evade internet filters. The CIA also developed mobile internet kits which they disseminated to some Iranians. After previously cutting democracy promotion programs leftover from the Bush administration, the Obama administration went on to spend millions of dollars training more than 5,000 democracy activists worldwide, some related directly to Iran. In 2011 (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 3), the State Department opened an online "virtual embassy for Iran," which was clearly designed to influence Iranian youth, and which Tehran promptly blocked. Finally, Voice of America's Persian News Network (Sanger 2012, 213-219), which was already expanding its outreach to the Iranian people with U.S.-sponsored news and commentary, vastly increased its penetration of Iranian audiences after the 2009 elections, drawing the ire of Iran's leaders. The events surrounding the 2009 election were relatively short-lived, but it is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the human rights *layer* impacted every other facet of the relationship moving forward. Constituencies on both sides had a new pool of excuses to argue against trust or cooperation.

In the midst of these developments, the Obama administration had yet to tackle the issue of Iran's nuclear program. In early 2009 (El Baradei 2011, 295, 298), the U.S. intelligence community identified a previously undeclared nuclear installation at Ferdowsi, near Qom, which experts believed was intended for military purposes. Anticipating imminent disclosure in September, the Iranians informed the IAEA. At the same time, the newly reelected Ahmadinejad passed a message for Obama through IAEA chief El Baradei that Iran was "ready to engage in bilateral negotiations, without conditions on the basis of mutual respect," also offering potential cooperation on Afghanistan and elsewhere. Unconvinced with regard to this offer for engagement, Obama (Clinton 2014, 424-425) seized the initiative by briefing the United Nations on the full extent of Iran's duplicity, in an effort to increase international pressure on Iran.

In spite this confrontational move, senior U.S. officials met face-to-face with Iranian counterparts for the first time since the revolution at a P5+1 meeting in Geneva the next month, and senior diplomat William Burns (2019, 349-353) engineered a proposal for Iran that built upon a request they had made to the IAEA earlier in 2009. Iran wanted 20 percent enriched uranium for a research reactor that manufactured medical isotopes. Burns offered another freeze-for-freeze. Along with freezing new sanctions in return for a halt on Iranian enrichment, the U.S. or its allies would take Iran's existing stock of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU), enrich it to 20 percent, and return it to Iran for their reactor. Ahmadinejad (El Baradei 2011, 308-311) was interested in the proposal, but when Iran's negotiators took it back to Tehran, political wrangling ensued and Khamenei intervened to turn it down, calling it an "indignity" to Iran. Burns (2019, 353) summed it up by saying that, "The Iranian president's political rivals, some of whom had been involved in nuclear negotiations before and might otherwise have taken more supportive positions, didn't want Ahmadinejad to get credit for any breakthrough, however modest." For constituencies, the conflict was less about the U.S. and more about the utility that animosity provided. The domestic politics *layer* of the relationship had reared its head.

In the wake of this failure, U.S. diplomats began a worldwide effort to garner support for international sanctions against Iran, and Ahmadinejad (El Baradei 2011, 312-313) defiantly declared Iran a "nuclear state." In an effort to head off sanctions, though, Iran worked with Turkey and Brazil and announced a resurrected version of Burns' original proposal, which they announced in May. Obama (Burns 2019, 353-354) dismissed the proposal as "too little, too late." Critics (Nasr 2013, 122-125) took this as proof that Obama was never actually serious about a negotiated solution, but this new proposal would have removed only a minority of Iran's LEU stockpile and failed to halt further domestic enrichment. In June 2010, the U.N. Security Council (2010) passed Resolution 1929 which targeted the IRGC along with its affiliates and financial interests and imposed a complete arms embargo against Iran.

Perhaps even more importantly, this symbolic action paved the way for both U.S. and E.U. sanctions (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 3, 37) legislation which went into effect in July 2010, targeting Iran's oil industry and applying financial sanctions on companies from any country doing business with Iran's energy sector. Interestingly (Solomon 2016, 195-201) Obama's White House actually opposed the sanctions bill that he, himself, had initiated in 2007, fearing it would alienate U.S. allies by sanctioning their countries. With bipartisan support for the bill, however, Obama had little choice but to go all in on opposition to Iran. With sanctions in place, the Departments of State and Treasury created new units to identify sanctions violators and began to levy billions of dollars in fines. Concurrent with sanctions, U.S. diplomats were working with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the U.A.E. to coordinate increased production that would offset the loss of Iranian oil to world oil markets.

In the midst of rising tensions, Obama apparently held out some hope for more productive engagement with Iran. In March 2010, he (Obama 2010) sent a second *Nowruz* message in December 2010. This time the tone was less sanguine. He offered respect to the people of Iran, but in a manner more reminiscent of Bush before him, he bifurcated the message between the Iranian government and its citizens, stating that, "Faced with an extended hand, Iran's leaders have shown only a clenched fist." In December, Clinton (2014, 434) made an aggressive attempt to openly engage Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki at an international conference and present an offer for dialogue. Mottaki avoided contact, shunning the offer.

Another key development in the U.S.-Iranian relationship that added a new *layer* to conflict came to light in 2010, the Stuxnet virus. While still officially denied by the U.S. government, Sanger (2012, 188-209) provided a detailed account of this U.S. cyber operation against Iran which deployed an innovative weapon against the centrifuges in Iran's nuclear program. The operation originated in 2006, when Bush was looking for another options besides military force and sanctions to set back the Iranian

nuclear program. By working with Israel on the project, the U.S. sent a message to the Israeli government that airstrikes were not the only way to deal with Iran. Bush personally handed the operation over to Obama, who continued the effort. It was aggressively deployed in 2010, damaging a significant number of Iranian centrifuges, but the computer virus, which became known as Stuxnet also leaked out onto the wider internet, where it was discovered and became public knowledge. Sanger (2012, 207) pointed out that, while Stuxnet set Iran back in certain areas, its total output of enriched uranium did not decline during this period. At best, Stuxnet bought additional time for negotiations. On the other hand, Stuxnet added a new *layer* to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, which the Iranian side would not be remiss in adopting themselves, cyber warfare.

The terrorism *layer* was not entirely absent from this period either. First, Iran plotted terrorist attacks (Crist 2012, 552-553) in 2011 against Israeli interests in Georgia, Thailand, and India. Although these were most likely a response to an Israeli campaign of bombings and targeted assassinations inside Iran (to be discussed more in the next section), U.S. officials like Clinton (2014, 442) made little distinction between when charging Iran with acts of terrorism. More damaging to U.S.-Iran relations, the FBI (Axworthy 2013, 419-421) uncovered an Iranian plot in October 2011 to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, D.C. An attack on U.S. soil was uncharacteristic of the Iranian security services, and Mousavian (2015, 236-237) made the point that this allegation against Iran did not make sense given that Iran was cooperating on a number of fronts with the IAEA in the context of the nuclear negotiations. However, if one buys the argument that constituencies to the conflict were likely trying to undermine those negotiations, this otherwise improbable event seems remarkably consistent with previous patterns. Either way, this brought U.S.-Iranian relations to a new low at precisely the time when Congress was pressing hardest against Iran.

The domestic politics *layer* featured on the U.S. side as well. In late 2011 (Solomon 2016, 200-210), Congress made a bi-partisan push for a new set of sanctions designed to cripple and isolate key sectors of Iran's economy, especially its banks. Obama felt that these measures were counterproductive to a negotiated solution and resisted a bipartisan effort, drawing special criticism from Republican Senators as he headed into an election year. Much like Clinton in 1995, Obama attempted to reclaim the initiative in foreign policy by introducing two sets of his own unilateral sanctions through the Treasury Department (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 3-4) in November 2011. However, the legislation passed at the end of December as part of the FY2012 National Defense Authorization Act, adding to the other sanctions already in place. The next year would see this noose tighten around Iran as the U.S. and the E.U. developed a truly unprecedented sanctions regime building especially into the 2012 U.S. presidential election, and military action (Clinton 2014, 438-439) remained on the table, as well.

While Obama desired a reset in relations with Iran, domestic constituencies to the conflict tied hands and made rapprochement a political non-starter. Constituencies in Iran provided all the ammunition that hawks on the U.S. side needed to justify the conflict. Likewise, Ahmadinejad desired a breakthrough in relations with the U.S., but domestic constituencies in Iran were not about to give him a political victory in this arena. Hostile actions by the U.S. stirred the pot, as well. As the next section will show, Khamenei and his supporters had little to gain and much to lose from rapprochement with the West, so every measure taken against Iran served as an all-too-convenient vindication for their hardline position. Another period that began with considerable promise ended on the brink of war.

The institutional development of constituencies

Obama's election and early years in office might be taken as proof of the old maxim, *the more things change, the more they stay the same*. Obama came into office campaigning as the polar opposite of his predecessor, but after four years, observers like Nasr (2013, 114, 128) claimed that Obama's policy on Iran was merely a continuation of the one started by Bush before him, only with slightly better salesmanship in the press. The "reset" advocated by Kinzer (2010) and many others seemed no closer than when he started, and "hope" that rhetorically characterized the Obama campaign had done little "change" the relationship. It has been the contention of this dissertation all along that institutional forces explain patterns of path dependency effects, and those forces are most visible and identifiable within constituencies to the conflict. During this period, *layering* was the most prevalent of the mechanisms under study. Instead of falling by the wayside, baggage from previous decades reappeared and took new and more salient forms. This invisible force operated beneath the headlines to ensure that hostility continued.

Iran's clerical establishment demonstrated a high degree of *layering*, especially in the manner that domestic politics weighed on the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Opposition to the U.S. was rarely an end in itself, but it became a means for achieving a widening array of other objectives. As discussed in the previous chapter, Iran's leaders (mostly for the sake of domestic politics) had made the nuclear program popular with their public audience. In spite of the costs it was imposing on Iran, all of the leading candidates (Abootalebi 2009, 6) for the 2009 presidential election openly touted Iran's right to enrich uranium, including Mousavi. When the U.S. engaged Iran directly in Geneva in October 2009, William Burns engineered an offer that would have been good for the Iranian side (especially demonstrated by the fact they agreed to a very similar offer with Brazil and Turkey in May 2010). However, the nuclear issue was an all-too-convenient political bludgeon. Ahmadinejad's rivals (El Baradei 2011, 310-311)

(including Ali Larijani, who had apparently made sincere attempts at negotiation himself several years earlier) chose a short-term political win over Iran's long-term benefit by scuttling the deal and accusing him of selling out to the West.

Ray Takeyh (McManus 2009) opined that the deal failed because Iran's government was too gridlocked to make a decision after the 2009 presidential election controversy. Perhaps this played a role, but the outcome followed a now-predictable pattern. Takeyh (2009) published an amplification of his views a month later, stating that after the election, hardline elements strongly associated with IRGC formed a new and secretive national security council under the Supreme Leader which opposed any compromise over the nuclear issue. Hardline nuclear ambitions may also have played a role, but Burns' proposal would not have ended Iran's nuclear ambitions by any means. It is more likely that this new body was marking its territory vis-a-vis Ahmadinejad in the early stages of its formation. Almost any way the historical information is presented, the domestic politics *layer* was clearly the primary factor in preventing nuclear cooperation, and the constituencies in Iran led the way.

The 2009 presidential election controversy activated and amplified both the domestic politics and human rights *layers* of the conflict for the clerical establishment. As pointed out by Axworthy (2013, 407-408), the fallout from the elections weakened Khamenei politically. As Supreme Leader, Khamenei had tried to follow Khomeini's pattern, keeping himself above the political fray in public view as a representative of a higher power. By siding publicly with Ahmadinejad during such a pivotal moment, however, Khamenei sacrificed any remaining moral authority he still retained in the eyes of many Iranians. Protestors cries of "death to the dictator" (referring to Khamenei) could not have been any more blatantly reminiscent of the slogan "death to the Shah," which he had personally encouraged 30 years before. Khamenei was now more beholden than ever to the IRGC and clerical security forces

which proceeded to crush the Green Movement, and he was likewise beholden to hardline clerics and clerical allies willing to prop up the institution of *valyat-e faqih*.

This coalition of forces perceived a direct threat from the Western human rights agenda, and just as during the 1990's, its economic interests flourished in the opacity of Iran's international isolation. Khamenei might have been genuinely offended by Obama's criticism after the election, but regardless, he was in no position to compromise with the U.S. Even further, by openly supporting Ahmadinejad, Khamenei tied his own reputation to the reelected president. Ahmadinejad may have preferred a deal with the West, but when he was outflanked by his rivals, he became just as intransigent as ever with regard to Iran's nuclear program. Curiously, Ahmadinejad (Maloney 2015, 361-362) overstepped his own boundaries in 2011 by openly challenging the Supreme Leader regarding the firing of a particular cabinet minister. Khamenei not only withdrew his support but publicly suggested doing away with the position of the presidency altogether. At this point, though, Ahmadinejad's star was waning, and his administration was caught in multiple scandals over corruption and mismanagement. It was politically convenient for the Supreme Leader to disassociate himself, but now he relied even more on hardliners hostile to both the U.S. and Western human rights. Neither Ahmadinejad nor Khamenei could act independently of the constituencies to the conflict.

Another area of *layering* to discuss with regard to the clerical establishment was the *layer* of sanctions. The Islamic Republic had been subject to various types of U.S. and international sanctions (Cordesman, et al. 2014, 36-37) since the hostage crisis during the Carter administration. Every successive U.S. president added sanctions of their own, and the Obama administration took this to a new level. Sanctions were a hostile act, and they had always been a source of friction between the U.S. and Iran. The sanctions, along with their underlying demands, were insulting to Iranian leaders, frequently drawing the ire of leaders like Khamenei who resented American "threat and enticement"

(Mousavian 2015, 225). But it would be difficult to argue that, at least up until the end of this period, sanctions had ever produced a positive change in Iranian behavior. Iranian leaders were used to being sanctioned, and they were practiced at evading them. Maloney (2015, 354-357) argued that the clerical establishment were optimistic that sanctions would fail to garner international support, and their effectiveness would be short-lived, as had been the regular pattern for decades.

Perversely, the economic isolation (Fathollah-Nejad 2014, 54-55) produced by sanctions served to bolster the financial positions of many IRGC affiliates and other clerical establishment insiders. Perhaps most importantly, sanctions fueled the narrative of the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei had self-identified in a 2013 speech as "not a diplomat but a revolutionary" (Mousavian 2015, 226). In response to sanctions, Khamenei reverted to a concept that Iranian leaders had promoted variously since the 1980's (Maloney 2015, 355), building an "economy of resistance." Maloney (2015, 473-483) pointed out that Iran's typical response to sanctions involved conspiracy theories, resistance, and moral counterarguments, all of which fed their own worldview. Ultimately, the sanctions *layer* of the conflict thickened, not just because new sanctions increased the level of hostility, but because they fed a pattern of expectation and behavior within the clerical establishment that thrived on conflict with the U.S. This constituency needed to fuel the conflict with the U.S. because it underpinned a status quo that kept them in power and concentrated Iran's wealth in their hands.

The IRGC and clerical security forces were busy adding a variety of *layers* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, as well. This constituency had become the power behind the throne in Iran, and they had no interest in normalizing relations with the outside world. To begin with, they were instrumental in putting down the largest and most significant popular challenge to Iran's clerical leadership since the revolution, the Green Movement. Crist (2012, 546) stated that the IRGC leadership advocated a much more forceful response to the protests, but clerical leaders feared they would alienate themselves from

the people entirely. Regardless, the IRGC stage-managed the campaign of repression (Pourzand 2010, 99, 102-103) (Safshekan and Sabet 2010, 556) which was carried out largely by the extensive network of Basij forces across Iran. They aggravated the human rights *layer* by using mass arrests, beatings, and torture to intimidate opponents. They also began to aggressively target internet freedom (Golkar 2011), beginning what would become an extensive system of national control over the cyber realm. Seizing on the example set by Stuxnet, the IRGC additionally began building an offensive cyber capability of its own for use against the U.S., adding to the newly created cyber warfare *layer* emplaced by the U.S. and Israel.

As previously mentioned (Takeyh 2009a), the IRGC also jumped at the opportunity to formalize their expanded role as guardians of the regime by installing their personnel in a new and secretive security council, which stood between the Supreme Leader and other branches of the government. This increased their political clout, but it came at the expense of existing power brokers, with whom they would contend for power, exacerbating the domestic politics *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict. Beside their security role, the IRGC still controlled and operated Iran's nuclear program. There expansion of uranium enrichment had obvious implications for the nuclear *layer* of the conflict, but it likewise affected the domestic politics *layer*, because the nuclear program provided a key source of relevance which undergirded their political and economic power. If the nuclear program became less important in Iranian politics, so would the IRGC. This provided a strong incentive to oppose reconciliation with the U.S.

The IRGC thickened the *layers* related to Persian Gulf security, terrorism, and the Iraq War, as well. While this received little publicity, IRGC naval forces (Crist 2012, 559-560) continued to harass U.S. and British patrols in the Gulf. In 2011, this almost led to a direct-fire incident with a British warship, serving as a warning to both the U.S. and Britain alike. Iranian forces also plotted attacks (though not

conducted successfully) against Israeli interests in India, Thailand and Georgia. These were provoked by an Israeli campaign within Iran against IRGC affiliates, especially nuclear scientists, but regardless, the actions reinforced Iran's international reputation as a terrorist state. Further, as previously discussed, Iran's almost bizarre plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. is best explained as the handiwork of IRGC personnel with little interest in seeing the nuclear negotiations succeed or Iran's relationship with America improve.

Finally, Iranian forces (Crist 2012, 537, 558-559) continued to undermine and sponsor attacks against U.S. forces for the remainder of their time in Iraq. As the U.S. consolidated onto bases and eventually withdrew combat forces in 2011, Quds Force Commander Soleimani consistently looked for opportunities to needle and provoke his favorite adversary. He also took an active interest in seeing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government firmly entrenched through his reelection in 2010. The pro-Iranian Maliki government (Al-Ali 2014) was largely responsible for exacerbating the ethnic divide in Iraq and paving the way for the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which eventually captured most of northern and western Iraq in 2014. As the next section will discuss, Iran's policies in both Iraq and Syria contributed directly to the rise of ISIL, which strained the relationship between the U.S. and Iran even further.

With the American war in Iraq drawing to a close, CENTCOM was a full-fledged constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict during this period. While this command was often distracted by other short-term priorities, Iran was its bread and butter in the long-term. CENTCOM was integral in the nuclear *layer* for several reasons. First, as Israel and Congress pressured the Obama administration to maintain a viable threat of military strikes against Iran, it was CENTCOM that was responsible for planning those strikes and ensuring assets were in place for their execution, making Iran a key priority within the command's mission set. Second, in support of the pressure campaign against Iran, CENTCOM (Clinton

2014, 438-439) expanded its military presence in the Persian Gulf region through exercises and patrols, aggravating tensions and increasing its friction with IRGC naval forces in the Gulf. Third, CENTCOM (Crist 2012, 557-558) increased support to its network of Arab and Turkish allies in the region. It conducted exercises, and it worked to develop and deploy a missile shield designed specifically to protect Gulf states and eventually Europe against Iranian attacks. The Gulf states in particular pressed the Obama administration (Sanger 2012, 159-161) for pressure against Iran, and this was mediated through the security architecture that had largely been established and maintained by CENTCOM, which had played a leading role for U.S. policy within the Middle East for decades. This stood as a testament to *layering* that began in the 1980's, bifurcating the Middle East between friends and enemies.

With the war in Iraq diminishing, CENTCOM also experienced a degree of *displacement and conversion* which increased its focus on Iran. According to a 2011 posture statement to the U.S. Congress (Committee on Armed Services 2011, 65, 72, 87-89), which was an integral part of CENTCOM's budget request for FY2012, the war in Afghanistan, which had always taken second place to the war in Iraq became CENTCOM "main effort." Number two was partnership with Pakistan, an effort that involved a very high price tag in U.S. military aid. The third on its list of nine key tasks was "countering Iran's destabilizing activities and keeping peace with our partners." By the language expressed in the document, Iran had again displaced Iraq as a key source of threats.

Significantly, these threats and activities justified the funding requested for the command. With Iran apparently increasing in priority, it is worth asking whether they had actually a greater threat to the U.S. Aside from their stockpile of Low Enriched Uranium which brought them closer to a nuclear weapon, there is little to suggest that Iran's military capabilities were significantly more threatening. This is not to argue that CENTCOM's assessment of Iran was baseless. This dissertation asserts that an organization like CENTCOM is fundamentally built to counter threats. In the absence of something more

pressing, though, Iran has been the default button since formation of the command. Afghanistan and Iraq were only temporary examples of *displacement*. As they diminished in priority, CENTCOM found itself consistently reverting to its focus on Iran, which had cultivated since the early 1980's.

CENTCOM's top leadership also helped broadcast the command's constituency to the conflict, simultaneously demonstrating the mechanism of *drift*. Admiral Fallon, who commanded CENTCOM in 2008 preferred to focus on Iraq and avoid confrontation with Iran, but his commander in Iraq, General Petraeus, was openly confronting Iran within the context of his own campaign. After a brief interlude, General Petraeus became CENTCOM commander, and shaped by his own confrontation with Soleimani, advocated a more muscular approach to Iran. In 2010, after another brief interim period, the reins of CENTCOM passed to Marine General James Mattis, who quickly developed a reputation as the most hawkish yet of CENTCOM's commanders. Mattis minced few words in declaring Iran the greatest threat to U.S. national security in the Middle East, and observers (Perry 2016) noted that his history of personal animosity against Iran traced its roots all the way back to Beirut bombing in 1983. CENTCOM may have been shaped by the personalities of its commanders, but institutional forces directed the course of these leaders as much or more.

As Soleimani's proxy forces rocketed the remaining U.S. troops in Baghdad prior to the final withdrawal, Mattis (Jaffe and Entous 2017) advocated aggressively striking targets on Iranian soil in retaliation. It is worth noting that while these attacks produced casualties, their scale was not comparable to efforts that Iran had arrayed against coalition forces five years earlier. The U.S. did not attack Iran at that time either. Mattis apparently considered the Bush-era restraint to have been a tremendous mistake. Again, after the FBI uncovered the late 2011 Iranian plot against the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, D.C. (Torrance 2019), Mattis advocated direct retaliation against Iran. When Obama demurred, Mattis expressed the opinion that this failure to retaliate against an "act of

war" emboldened Iran and made them even more dangerous. Receiving only aggressive policy options from Mattis with regard to Iran, Obama abruptly announced his decision to replace him as CENTCOM Commander in December 2012. Each of these succeeding commanders dealt with Iran in their own fashion, based upon a continually expanding base of experiences generated by U.S.-Iranian friction. Each added their own imprint along the way, building the conflict over time.

Israel proved to be arguably the strongest constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict throughout this period. As with the succession of CENTCOM commanders, Israel also experienced notable *drift* in a confrontational direction and contributed to *layering*. Less than a month after Obama's inauguration (Freedman 2020, 138-140), the Israelis elected hardline conservative Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister. The famously abrasive Netanyahu had been known for aggravating relations between Israel and the Clinton White House during his first service as Prime Minister in the late 1990's, and his relationship with Obama would be even more contentious. Obama entered office determined to energize the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and pursue a diplomatic solution to the nuclear standoff with Iran. In order to do both, he believed that the U.S. needed to be seen as an honest broker within the region, distancing itself from open complicity with Israel. Netanyahu, on the other hand, showed little interest in the peace process, and he actively undermined the two-state solution by supporting illegal settlements. Instead, Netanyahu clung to a securitized worldview (David 2020, 200-201) and preferred to focus primarily on the existential threat that he believed Iran posed to Israel, setting this tone from the outset in his inauguration address. Israel was not interested compromise, and it was not willing to accept any uranium enrichment by Iran that might eventually lead to a nuclear weapon.

Parsi (2017, 74) described Obama and Netanyahu's first official meeting as heads of state in May 2009 as "nothing short of a disaster," a clash of two competing worldviews. From that point forward, Israel pursued what Parsi (2017, 75-78, 117, 150) described as a two-prong strategy of imposing

impossible demands, like zero-enrichment, while simultaneously undermining the political space for diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran. From the very outset in 2009, Netanyahu attempted to impose artificial deadlines on U.S. negotiations with Iran, advising Obama to wait no more than 12 weeks for progress. As negotiations continued, he used continually revised projections of Iran's "breakout" date (when it would have enough enriched uranium for a bomb), such as March 2011, to pressure the U.S. For its part, the Obama administration resisted these efforts, realizing that this strategy was designed to force the U.S. hand and leave no remaining options but military force when Iran inevitably failed to comply.

To the same end, Israel (David 2020, 201) repeatedly threatened (both explicitly and implicitly) that it was prepared to unilaterally strike Iran. According to Parsi (2017, 119, 158-159), Netanyahu went as far as to order a mobilization of the Israeli military against Iran in an effort to escalate tensions, not so Israel could actually strike Iran, but to draw the U.S. into a military confrontation. Senior Israeli officials disobeyed his orders to prevent this, but these continuing efforts forced CENTCOM to prepare for the fallout of a new Middle East war. The underlying theme of Parsi's work was that Netanyahu's preoccupation with Iran was at least as much about domestic politics (including the desire to deflect pressure regarding the peace process) as it was really about Iran - the domestic politics *layer*. Confrontation with Iran allowed Israel to continue portraying itself as David, besieged by Goliath, all the while directing attention away from its controversial policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Israel added or thickened several additional *layers* of the conflict for the U.S. First, largely through AIPAC (Parsi 2017, 101-102, 114-115), Israel pushed Congress to sponsor sanctions that would preempt diplomacy with Iran. The House of Representative passed a sanctions bill in December 2009 before Iran had even responded to Burns' proposal regarding uranium for medical isotopes. Obama continually had to slow-roll the efforts of Congress to create space for diplomacy and maintain his

prerogative for driving foreign policy, a clear aggravation of the domestic politics *layer* within the U.S. Second, Israel sponsored a covert campaign of assassinations and bombings against IRGC affiliates within Iran (Sanger 2012, 142-146) (Dehghan 2012), especially a number of nuclear scientists. The U.S. apparently had nothing to do with these activities, but just as American leaders failed to delineate Iran's terrorism against regional adversaries from terrorism against itself, Iran failed to delineate Israeli-sponsored terrorism from U.S. actions. This added a new dimension to the terrorism *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship and invited Iranian retaliation against Israeli targets, fueling the cycle of conflict and accusation for all parties and undermining negotiations. Third, Israel collaborated with the U.S. (Sanger 2012, 188-209) in developing and deploying the Stuxnet virus which damaged a significant number of Iranian centrifuges. While never official claiming credit, Israeli officials were quick to gloat over their activities, not unlike Iranian officials after the Beirut bombings in 1983. Israel was integral to adding the cyber warfare *layer* to the U.S.-Iranian conflict.

Finally, Congress was more active than it had been in previous years as a constituent to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, spurred by the Israeli, domestic politics and human rights *layers*, but thickening the sanctions *layer* of the conflict with their own actions. As with their counterparts in Iran, conflict was less about any moral imperative and more about the political utility of confrontation. The influence of AIPAC has already been discussed, and this certainly helps to explain why sanctions against Iran garnered broad-based support across both parties, but Israel was not the only angle affecting Congress. Congressional democrats (Parsi 2017, 86-87), who had toned down opposition to Iran in order to focus criticism on the Bush administration, now increased their support for sanctions against Iran in the wake of the 2009 election controversy and Iranian crackdown on protestors. Regardless of the truth about the election, U.S. observers had drawn their own conclusions, and there was no political benefit to American lawmakers from giving Iran's clerics the benefit of the doubt. The human rights *layer* tied their hands.

For Republicans, seething at Obama's election in favor his rival, Senator John McCain, Iran was a ready-made weapon against their political rival. As always, there was little to lose by being tough on Iran. Sanctions were a costly endeavor, but it was a cost that few American taxpayers would notice on an individual basis. With regard to the negotiations, Congress had little skin in the game, and many believed they were destined for failure, anyway. Causing the administration to flounder in the process worked to their political advantage. With regard to military action, Congress could afford to be bellicose. Few projected a positive outcome from military strikes, and Obama was especially unlikely to order them. This gave Congressional Republicans the advantage of being able to talk tough without worrying that they might be starting a war. Even if Obama did authorize strikes, he would hold the bag, not Congress. All of these issues became even more important as the 2012 U.S. elections approached. Iran was not the main issue for any of the candidates, but the conflict had the potential to undermine issues they considered far more important, thus shaping the debate.

In short, constituencies played either a direct or indirect in every development between the U.S. and Iran throughout this period. Leaders in both the U.S. and Iran apparently preferred a reduction in hostility, but no leader could resist the combined weight of multiple constituencies dragging on both sides of the conflict. The next episode, however, would provide the greatest test the constituencies had faced since their formation.

JPCOA and ISIS

Regardless of the disappointments of the Obama's first term in office with regard to the U.S.-Iranian relationship, events were in motion that would provide new opportunities for a positive change. The most prominent involved the nuclear negotiations that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JPCOA), signed in July 2015, which offered a definitive solution to the nuclear conflict between the U.S. and Iran. In fact, this agreement was so unprecedented that its success offers the greatest challenge in four decades to the concept of institutional animosity. Constituencies do not always win; actors and events get a vote in deciding outcomes. However, constituencies will always act according to their institutional design, and they do not simply disappear because of setbacks. This section will discuss the implications of the JPCOA for the argument advanced by this dissertation.

Another key event was the Arab Spring, which began in 2011 and sparked a civil war in Iran's ally, Syria. As a result, regional destabilization led to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) (see Irshaid 2015 for a discussion of naming), a descendent of Al Qaeda in Iraq which controlled significant swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory by late 2014. ISIS provided the U.S. and Iran with a common enemy and created the potential for cooperation between the two adversaries. Instead, the relationship between the U.S. and Iran continued on its predictable pattern of mistrust and antagonism regarding regional affairs, despite progress on the nuclear front. This section will examine how the operation of constituencies to the conflict allowed one opportunity to produce a surprising success while the other fell flat, and it will discuss how institutional dynamics contributed to the process.

What happened?

Obama's 2012 reelection campaign shifted the focus of his administration away from his goals with regard to Iran. Entering the race with low approval ratings (IPCSR 2020), domestic issues (particularly the economic recovery) defined the race. Where Iran factored into the discussion, Republican criticism forced Obama to harden his stance, as exemplified by the late 2011 sanctions against Iran which he ultimately signed into law and a shift in is campaign speeches (Freedman 2020,

144) toward greater support for Israel. Iran remained intransigent throughout this period, offering no public sign of capitulation as Obama ultimately defeated his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney in November 2012. Obama's victory gave him breathing room to continue pursuing his own agenda, including with respect to Iran. In actuality, a door had already been opened that would lead to a major breakthrough as events continued to unfold.

Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said of Oman (Kerry 2018, 487-491) proved himself useful as a potential conduit between the U.S. and Iran between 2009 and 2011, helping behind the scenes to secure the release of three American hikers who had been detained by Iran. In 2011, the Sultan again offered his services as Obama looked for a way to negotiate directly with Iran's Supreme Leader, whose buy-in he understood to be crucial for any potential deal over the nuclear issue. From the outset, the keys to success were determined to be secrecy (which precluded the interference of domestic factions on either side) and the ability to prove that the negotiators spoke with authority. Establishing this channel was a political risk, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was skeptical of the effort, so Obama asked Senator John Kerry, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to visit Muscat and lay the groundwork in December 2011. In July 2012, the U.S. sent a small delegation of senior diplomatic officials to Muscat to meet with Iranian counterparts. The first meeting produced few results as both sides talked past each other, but this established a new channel for communication.

According to Parsi (2017, 174-182), the Obama administration began to reconsider its approach to negotiations with Iran by the end of 2012. Western allies supported the U.S. position of "zero-enrichment," but this was becoming increasingly unpopular as the rest of the world grew nervous about a military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. More importantly, the realization was dawning that Iran's enrichment would likely yield enough fissile material for weaponization in a matter of months, whereas the pressure campaign was certain to take longer, if it worked at all. Obama changed tack and

decided to offer Iran the concession that it said it wanted, the right to enrich its own uranium on a limited basis. The U.S. and Iran tried again in Muscat (Burns 2019, 359-367) in March 2013. Obama sent senior diplomat William Burns with the offer that the U.S. was willing to accept a very limited and controlled enrichment program. Burns established ground rules that this channel was complimentary to the P5+1 negotiations, not a replacement, and the discussion would be limited to the nuclear program, although the Iranians still at times leaned toward wanting a "grand bargain" that would solve all their issues at once. While the results were more encouraging, Burns (2019, 366-367) stated that there was still, "powerful cognitive dissonance at the heart of our discussions at this stage…" What changed the dynamic of the negotiations was the election of Hasan Rouhani as Iranian president in June 2013.

Perhaps even more than the election of Ahmadinejad before him, Rouhani's election was a surprise to both the clerical establishment and the population alike. Wanting to expunge the influence of the increasingly reviled Ahmadinejad, the Khamenei's Guardian Council (Hunter 2014, 243-258) disqualified the chosen successor from his camp. In a move that still provokes discussion, the council also disqualified former president Rafsanjani, who had rebranded himself in the cloak of the reform movement. Hasan Rouhani, who had led Iran's nuclear negotiations under the Khatami administration before the 2005 election, was allowed to run because he was believed to have been so thoroughly discredited that he posed no challenge to the conservative favorite, Saeed Jalili. In the final weeks before the election, though, reformers of all stripes coalesced around Rouhani. Since the suppression of the Green Movement after the 2009 election, Iran's population had been left out of the conversation regarding their country's nuclear program and defiance of the international community. Through the speeches and debates generated by the campaign, it suddenly became clear that the Iranian people overwhelmingly favored improved relations with the West and were becoming disenchanted with the revolutionary themes of resistance and the deprivations wrought by international sanctions. This bore out on election day, when Rouhani captured just over 50 percent of the vote and avoided a runoff

election. The fact that the clerical establishment allowed this close result to stand without interference may have been a testament to Khamenei's fears of another popular uprising.

Rouhani's election changed the tenor of the U.S.-Iranian relationship almost immediately. Obama sent a congratulatory letter (Burns 2019, 368-369) to Rouhani, who responded promptly in a positive manner. In September 2013, John Kerry (2018, 486-487) (Sherman 2018, 30-31), now Secretary of State, had a historic face-to-face conversation with Iran's new Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly meeting. This was followed soon after by another first for the relationship when Obama and Rouhani spoke directly by phone. For the next month-and-a-half, a succession of secret back-channel meetings ran in parallel with the P5+1 negotiations. While the meetings moved forward, both Burns (2019, 375 to 376) and Sherman (2018, 40-41) recounted how differences in culture and worldview made every step of the negotiations difficult and exhausting, probably for both sides.

By November, the Obama administration was ready to merge the tracks, and Ambassador Wendy Sherman (2018, 59-63, 66-70) received the unenviable task of informing the P5+1 partners that the U.S. and Iran were close to making a deal behind their backs. This led to some friction, which was soon worked out, but more significantly, the extent of the U.S.-Iranian negotiations was now subject to public scrutiny and to the attacks of the deal's opponents. From this point forward (Kerry 2018, 499-501) (Burns 2019, 376-381), the U.S. Congress and Israel worked tirelessly to undermine the negotiation process. Regardless, the parties signed an interim deal, known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in November, which went into effect in January 2014. The Iranians halted the bulk of their enrichment activities, and the U.S. began releasing installments of a group of $4.2 billion in frozen Iranian assets. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called it the "deal of the century" for Iran.

2014 was a year of diplomatic wrangling (Kerry 2018, 501-503) between the U.S. and Iran. Khamenei undermined the P5+1 talks in July in speech saying that Iran would not cut its enrichment but increase it tenfold. Talks in November stalemated, as well, but both sides understood that pressure was mounting to conclude a deal. The Obama administration kept the U.S. Congress and the Israeli government informed on the progress of the talks, but the lack of momentum was feeding the narrative that Iran was simply playing for time. As the new deadline of March 31, 2015 approached (Calamur 2015), Congressional Republicans arranged (without consulting the White House) for Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress and campaign against the "very bad deal." Republican Senator Tom Cotton (2015) authored a letter to Khamenei, signed by his Republican Senate colleagues, which strongly implied that Congress would disapprove or abrogate any deal the Obama administration made with Iran. Even still, by April 2, the P5+1 concluded its framework for the final deal.

Meanwhile, Congress pushed a bill (U.S. Congress 2015) originally introduced by Republican Senator Bob Corker, that would give the Senate the right of final refusal on any deal made with Iran. The Obama administration fought the effort (Parsi 2017, 290-297), but eventually conceded in May 2015. In June and July (Kerry 2018, 513-517, 523), with a full measure of diplomatic drama, the U.S. and Iran concluded their deal. In spite of a monumental effort by AIPAC and the Israeli government, the Obama administration found 42 Senate votes, enough to prevent any formal rejection by the Senate. The final agreement (The White House 2016), known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA) bound Iran to the NPT, along with 10 years under the additional protocol. It would keep their stockpile of enriched uranium below the level needed for a bomb for 15 years and subject Iranian enrichment to international monitoring and limitations. It also relieved Iran of international sanctions and suspended (pending periodic recertification) some (but not all) of the U.S. sanctions.

January 2016 was an eventful month for the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Iran fast-tracked its certification of compliance with the JPCOA, and implemented the agreement ahead of schedule by the middle of the month. Only days before implementation, however, a disabled U.S. Navy patrol (DeYoung 2016) strayed into Iranian waters. The IRGC intercepted the patrol and took 10 U.S. sailors captive at gunpoint, interrogating them and quickly transferring them to custody in Tehran. Not only was this a tremendous embarrassment to the U.S. Navy and CENTCOM, as the sailors had clearly made numerous mistakes, but Iran hawks like Republican Senator John McCain called Iran's actions an "act of war." Understanding the precarious nature of the fledgling JPCOA, Kerry and Zarif (Parsi 2017, 1-8) worked quickly through their newly formed diplomatic channels to defuse the situation, and Iran returned the sailors a day later, unharmed. Iran's hardliners (Castillo 2016) did not miss an opportunity to exploit the situation for propaganda purposes, though, and Khamenei publicly awarded medals to the officers responsible.

In another interesting twist, the U.S. and Iran conducted a prisoner swap (Toosi 2016), with Iran releasing five dual national Iranian-American political prisoners and the U.S. releasing eight Iranian citizens sentenced for crimes related to evading sanctions (although none of the Iranians chose to return to Iran). Almost simultaneously, the U.S. made a $400 million dollar payment to Iran. Kerry (2018, 518-521) explained that the prisoner swap had been negotiated separately from the JPCOA and just happened to coincide. Further, the money was the first installment of a $1.7 billion settlement that the U.S. had separately agreed to pay to Iran to avoid a lawsuit at the Hague over a larger amount. The timing allowed critics to accuse the Obama administration of paying ransom for the political prisoners, which Kerry vehemently denied. However, the State Department (Solomon and Lee 2016) admitted months later that the U.S. deliberately used this first installment as leverage to ensure that prisoners were released as promised. In many respects the U.S. relationship with the Islamic Republic was at an all-time high.

The nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran was only part of the picture, though. In fact, in order to get a viable deal with Iran, the Obama administration deliberately muted its reaction to Iran's other efforts at increasing its own influence withing the Middle East. When the 2011 Arab Spring movement prompted unrest in major cities throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Iran embraced the movement (Parchami 2012), claiming that it was an extension and a vindication of Iran's own Islamic Revolution. In terms of sponsorship, Iran's reach proved shorter than its rhetoric, but it promoted dissent among Shiite populations across the region. Kuwait (Friedman 2012, 80-84), in particular broke up eight Iranian spy networks (two of them armed) working among the Shiites, and Bahrain complained about similar Iranian infiltration. Iran had already been sponsoring the Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen (Terrill 2014), but it increased its support, enabling this group to destabilize the country throughout the 2010's. Where Iran was not promoting the banner of the Arab Spring, aside from within its own country as it cracked down on the Green Movement, was in its ally, Syria.

Iran cast its lot decisively with the Assad regime (Solomon 2016, 218-226) from the outset of the Syrian civil war, and it heavily leveraged both its IRGC forces and Lebanese Hezbollah to counter the uprising. Quds Force Commander Soleimani increased his own public profile and personal influence throughout the episode, and the Iranians (along with Russian air support) were integral in helping prevent the fall of Assad. For the Obama administration, Iran's actions in Syria presented a challenge. Obama deliberately chose not to directly involve the U.S. in the Syrian civil war, but he also staked a position that Assad needed to be removed for the good of Syria. Therefore, to a large degree, the U.S. could only watch from the sidelines as Iran helped produce exactly the opposite of Obama’s desired outcome. This became even more convoluted with the rise of ISIS.

If the Syrian civil war did not directly threaten U.S. interests in the region, ISIS certainly did. The Syrian civil war (Glenn, et al. 2019) allowed them to expand from an underground terrorist organization

to a powerful militia, sponsoring and inspiring terrorist attacks worldwide from a quasi-state that they established in Syrian and Iraqi territory. ISIS was a threat to Iran, as well, and Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2015, 2-6) argued that the degree of this threat has been underappreciated in the West. Real or imagined, many Iranians believed that ISIS was an existential threat capable of invading Iranian territory at any time, and they demanded action from their government, which of course boosted Soleimani's (Filkins 2013) celebrity status even further.

Because the U.S. had withdrawn its combat forces from Iraq and chosen not to engage in Syria, it was late to the game in fighting ISIS. CENTCOM (Schmitt 2015) attempted a fraught mission to build its own Syrian militia, to little avail, and ultimately it worked primarily through Kurdish militias (Vitalone 2019) in Syria and badly unprepared Iraqi Army forces (Broder 2015) in Iraq. It took several years for the U.S. to build its anti-ISIS coalition and deploy significant firepower support of its own. Meanwhile, Iran had Hezbollah and Syrian regular forces at its disposal in Syria, and when Soleimani shifted focus to Iraq, he had a pre-existing network of Shiite militias at his disposal. As a result, the U.S. and Iran (Hussain 2019) fought the same enemy in the same territory with little more than rudimentary tactical deconfliction, instead of partnership.

Should the U.S. and Iran have collaborated against ISIS? Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2015, 2-6, 10-11) argued that this was an important opportunity for both sides. Iran was making important contributions to the ISIS fight and had influence that the U.S. could not replicate. Further, Iran's hardliners were preoccupied with painting red lines for the nuclear program, not ISIS, so this might have been even more successful than the nuclear deal. Nader (2015) argued that the U.S. and Iran had divergent long-term goals, but that tactical cooperation in the short-term might be worthwhile, if carefully managed. Friedman (2018), on the other hand, summarized the argument against cooperation, believing that Iran remained a dangerous adversary that should be contained instead of

appeased. Cooperation would only implicate the U.S. in Iran's nefarious activities and complicate long-term strategic aims. As the nuclear negotiations were proceeding in 2014, both the U.S. and Iran sent mixed signals (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2015, 2) with regard to their willingness to cooperate against ISIS, but neither side officially pursued the effort.

The U.S. excluded Iran from its anti-ISIS coalition, a move reminiscent of the Madrid Conference in 1991, Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003 (Iran recused itself from the 1991 Gulf War). In the fight against ISIS, CENTCOM reverted to the regional order that it had been building since the 1980's for support and assistance (which had also become a thick *layer* in the U.S.-Iranian conflict). It is doubtful that any of the Gulf Arab States, in particular, would have been supportive of U.S. collaboration with Iran, and Israel was most certainly not. It is likely that the benefits of collaborating with Iran in this area were simply not worth fighting the institutional pressures that had insulated the two sides from a productive relationship. As the next section will show, the influence of constituencies made cooperation a moot point. The constituencies may have missed a beat in preventing the JPCOA, but they would never have allowed this kind of constructive collaboration to bear fruit.

The institutional development of constituencies

If animosity between two states builds over time in an institutional fashion, and constituencies to the conflict act as proponents for this institutional animosity, then the successful implementation of the JPCOA stands in need of explanation. Trita Parsi (2017, 346-351) made some key insights into why the JPCOA succeeded from a U.S. perspective. This dissertation will borrow elements from his analysis and argue that Parsi was actually making an institutional argument that applied to both the U.S. and

Iran. This section will then look beyond the JPCOA and examine how constituencies continued to develop and advance the conflict in an institutional fashion throughout this period.

To begin with, it is worthwhile to consider the non-institutional explanations for the JPCOA. On the U.S. side (Cassidy 2015) (Maloney 2014), proponents and critics of diplomacy alike credited the Obama administration's pressure campaign for bringing Iran to the table. Crippling sanctions left Iran with no other choice. Critics (Cornwell 2015) simply argued that the U.S. should have held out longer and forced a stricter deal on Iran. On the Iranian side (Parsi 2017, 362), leaders painted the JPCOA as a triumph of their enrichment strategy. Iran made its enrichment program a *fait accompli*, and the U.S. was forced to either accept Iran's right to enrich uranium or stand by helplessly as Iran stockpiled enough fissile material for a nuclear weapons program. The fact that both sides could claim victory from the same deal was probably a key factor in making the JPCOA ultimately viable. The problem is that, while both sides viewed the other as under pressure, neither side viewed themselves this way, and constituencies on both sides still opposed the negotiations. Parsi (2017, 362) argued that, in actuality, it was the newfound willingness to compromise by both sides that paved the way for a deal. These compromises generated the positive momentum that had been lacking for decades. This was undoubtedly important to finalizing the JPCOA, but it does not explain how the U.S. and Iran were able to come to the table in first place, in spite of clear opposition from constituencies on both sides.

This dissertation argues that the primary reason Obama and Rouhani succeeded in negotiating and implementing the JPCOA was because constituencies on both sides simultaneously failed in their efforts to perpetuate the conflict. They failed for two related reasons. First, they overplayed their hand. Second, they had become stultified by patterns repeated throughout decades of conflict and were unable to adapt to a unique moment in history. Both of these patterns played out earlier on the Iranian side than the U.S. side. After the 2009 election, the clerical establishment reasserted its dominance

over the people of Iran, relying on the security services to crush dissent and clamping down on social media and public freedoms. Khamenei rallied around Iran's nuclear program as a symbol of revolutionary resistance to the Western world, a familiar trope, and he called on Iranians to defiantly endure the effects of sanctions. In doing so, the clerical establishment lost touch with the pulse of the Iranian people (see Przeworski 2003, 15), and they were caught off guard by the results of the 2013 election. Parsi (2017, 204) relayed that, as it became apparent that Rouhani would win the election, a unit of IRGC soldiers surrounded Rouhani and his wife, waiting for orders but unclear as to whether their purpose was to protect the new president or arrest him.

Whereas before the election, Khamenei had based his strategy for political survival on his alliance with the IRGC, he now saw that he needed a broader base to avoid further alienating himself from the people. Protecting his domestic power base in the short term became more important than his stand over the nuclear program. Likewise, the IRGC had all but taken over as the power behind the throne in Iran. Now it found its wings clipped, and more moderate voices were directing Iranian policy. For its own sake, the IRGC had to avoid overt acts of extremism that might antagonize the population or further degrade its influence within Iran's circles of power. To this end, both the clerical establishment and the IRGC attempted to drag out and undermine the negotiations in typical fashion, but neither were willing to put themselves in a position to shoulder public responsibility if the talks failed. They were out of new ideas.

A similar process of overreach happened later on the U.S. side, most importantly by the U.S. Congress and Israel. By 2013, Obama already had an established backchannel to Iran, and taking advantage of a historic change in Iranian leadership, his administration gained the initiative by reaching a preliminary agreement outside the watchful eye of his critics. The November 2013 announcement of the back-channel's progress put Congress and Israel off guard. Their rhetorical line had been that

diplomacy with Iran was a fool's errand because Iran would never actually make a deal. Now that a deal was on the table, they could no longer disparage the diplomatic effort. The next fallback was to demand that Obama pursue an unrealistic outcome, zero enrichment. However, by taking such an extreme position, Parsi (2017, 346-351) pointed out that the opponents of diplomacy left no other realistic option except for military action. Obama understood, perhaps better than his critics, that the U.S. population was not prepared to go to war with Iran over its nuclear program. Much to their frustration (Cornwell 2015) (Jett 2018, 39-40), he turned his opponents' argument around and framed the debate for the American people as a choice between war and peace, which ultimately garnered the support he required, even from Congress.

Parsi (2017, 346) also explained that opponents of the JPCOA failed because they offered no viable alternative, but instead chose to "saturate the debate with a deluge of second-rate arguments, none of which held up to scrutiny or even addressed the central aspects of the deal. It was a strategy that smacked of defeatism…" Mark Dubowitz (2015, 2) from the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies provided an excellent example in his July 2015 Congressional testimony arguing against the JPCOA. Dubowitz argued that the U.S. should never accept Iranian enrichment because there were still "viable alternatives" for "coercive diplomacy." The alternatives he listed consisted of more sanctions (notwithstanding the fact that previous sanctions had not stopped Iran's enrichment) and two barely distinguishable prescriptions for direct military force against Iran - hardly a form of diplomacy (see Jett 2018, 39 for a list of justifications for preventing the deal). In a similar fashion, Netanyahu seemed to believe that beating his drum louder was a winning strategy, castigating the JPCOA at every opportunity without providing any alternatives. He also took for granted the level of influence that Israel had traditionally held in U.S. politics, and he apparently believed that he could successfully undermine the uncooperative U.S. president by appealing directly to Congress and the American people. With a stronger case, this might have worked, but as Parsi (2017, 350) described, the opponents of the JPCOA

were "disoriented." Opposing rapprochement with Iran had never before required a great deal of strategic thought or effort. The constituencies on both sides of the conflict had grown comfortable with their repertoires of action and lost ground, but this does not mean that they were down for the count.

It is also important to note that institutional stories rarely unfold over short time durations. The JPCOA was a victory for advocates of rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran, but as the next section will show, the agreement turned out to be short-lived, and it failed to deliver significant improvements in the relationship. The success of the JPCOA was limited precisely because it failed to alter the institutional dynamics of the conflict between the two parties. No conflict is permanent, but when it is constructed by institutional processes, it must be deconstructed by institutional processes as well. One could make the argument that the JPCOA was a significant step in this deconstruction process, but it was only one of many that would likely be required to alter the trajectory of the relationship. Of course, even as the nuclear negotiations were proceeding, the constituencies continued to operate and develop.

The clerical establishment, and Khamenei in particular, most likely allowed the JPCOA to proceed because of a short-term interest in pacifying its restive population and seeing sanctions lifted. Throughout the process (Khalaji 2015, 64-75), Iranian hardliners thickened the rhetorical *layer* of the conflict through anti-American statements, questioning the sincerity of the Obama administration and casting doubt on whether Iran would actually comply with a future deal. Once an agreement was reached, however, Khamenei (Milani and McFaul 2015) refrained from taking a position on it. This allowed the debate to take place in parliament, relatively openly. Supporters of the deal included all stripes of moderates and reformers within the Iranian government, along with most the Iranian people. Conservatives almost uniformly opposed the bill, citing security and sovereignty issues as their foremost concerns. However, Milani and McFaul (2015) suggested that justifications only thinly veiled the

political and economic interests that would be disrupted by increased engagement with the West. Institutional priorities had not changed, and even though Khamenei apparently acquiesced to the deal, his modus operandi remained remarkably consistent under the surface.

In October 2015 (Erdbrink 2015), the Iranian Parliament ratified the deal by a wide margin, and Khamenei denied the request of hardliners to modify the agreement. Within the domestic politics *layer* of the conflict, this was a deft maneuver by Khamenei, who essentially washed his hands of the JPCOA and placed responsibility for the deal and its outcome squarely on Rouhani and his moderate supporters. In a pattern similar to the way he had approached Khatami's presidency before, the Supreme leader allowed Rouhani some initial latitude in order to satisfy public opinion, but he was already tightening his grip on power behind the scenes. Khamenei had set Rouhani up to take the blame for failed policies, many of which he bore little responsibility for, and the conservatives used these failures to discredit the reform movement. Likewise, Rouhani now held the bag for both the success of the JPCOA and all the unrealistic hopes that Iranians had associated with it. Hardliners could now undermine the JPCOA with little consequence, and when it failed, Khamenei could say *I told you so!*

The IRGC and clerical security forces were hard at work building layers of the conflict, even as Iran negotiated with the P5+1. First, while the JPCOA (at least in theory) put the nuclear issue to rest, it did nothing to constrain Iran's ballistic missile program. When this constituency lost some ground in one issue, it simply shifted focus to other tracks in order to continue stoking the conflict. The IRGC had been developing its ballistic missile arsenal for many years, and they continued throughout the nuclear negotiations. Only a month after signing the JPCOA (Charbonneau 2015), Iran tested a medium-range missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead, in violation of the U.N. Security Council Ban on ballistic missile tests. Ballistic missiles were not a new *layer* to the relationship, but this *layer* was becoming more contentious as Iran increased its capability.

Second, largely in response to Stuxnet, the IRGC developed its own indigenous cyber warfare program, thickening the relatively new cyber *layer* of the relationship. Starting in 2011 (Eisenstadt 2016, 4), Iran began cyber espionage operations against at least 16 Western countries, penetrating businesses, infrastructure, and military facilities, and it conducted a number of cyber-attacks. In 2012 and 2013, Iranian agents targeted the New York Stock Exchange and U.S. Banks in successive waves of attacks, and a hacking penetration of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps networks took four months to completely rectify. In 2014, the Iran attacked the Sands Corporation, most likely in retaliation for its owner's advocacy of military action against Iran, and this took place during the JPCOA negotiations. The Congressional Research Service (2013) listed Iran in the company, of China, Russia, North Korea and the Islamic State as a key cyber threat to U.S. interests and infrastructure. Third, the IRGC's naval forces continued their aggressive posture in the Persian Gulf. The capture of the 10 U.S. sailors apparently took place without any specific direction from Tehran, but the IRGC jumped at the opportunity to embarrass the U.S. This episode might have thwarted the JPCOA just days from its implementation, but as usual, Khamenei rewarded the IRGC for its initiative.

Fourth, the IRGC and clerical security forces, led prominently by Qassim Soleimani, were actively driving to expand Iran's regional influence, an extension of several *layers* of the conflict. This section has already discussed Iran's activities in Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Yemen. The IRGC actively fought ISIS, which legitimately threatened the security of its homeland, and this might have provided fertile ground for cooperation with the U.S. However, Iran conducted all of its campaigns in a manner that furthered its strategic goals, and the ISIS fight never detracted from Iran's support to the Assad regime. Ostovar (2015) offered an alternative explanation why the IRGC acquiesced to the JPCOA. While IRGC affiliates may have still profited under the sanctions regime, there is no doubt that IRGC enterprises were among the most heavily affected by the sanctions, and they stood the most to gain from their

removal. Also, with U.S. and international isolation decreased, many felt it would give the IRGC a free hand to continue building Iranian influence across the region.

CENTCOM continued its role in the conflict as well. Obama replaced the hawkish General Mattis with General Lloyd Austin, but the new commander faced no fewer challenges within the region. The 2013 CENTCOM Posture Statement (Armed Services Committee 2013, 5-6) before Congress (one of Mattis's last acts as commander) listed "Malign Iranian Influence" as the first of CENTCOM's "most serious strategic risks to U.S. national security." Aside from the threats posed by Iran's nuclear, ballistic missile and cyber programs, it listed Iran's maritime threat in the Persian Gulf. More ominously, it described the "Iranian Threat Network" which served as an umbrella term for the amalgam of "illicit weapons, financial aid, trained personnel and training" that Iran and its proxies operated in at least seven countries throughout the region. CENTCOM charged the Assad regime with destabilizing Syria's neighbors and castigated Iran for propping up Assad. The 2014 Posture Statement (Armed Services Committee 2014) toned down language used to paint Iran as the key U.S. adversary (possibly pressured by the White House during the nuclear negotiations), but its description of Iran's capabilities and "threat network" was no less daunting.

To this effect, CENTCOM's regional footprint was just as threatening to Iran as it had been in previous episodes. The U.S. withdrew combat forces from Iraq in 2011, but it kept a significant training and advisory element, along with an extensive basing infrastructure. With the rise of ISIS, the U.S. returned some previously withdrawn ground troops (especially Special Operations Forces), spread over Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and it kept a large number of air assets within easy striking distance of Iran. In its own contribution to the ballistic missile *layer*, CENTCOM (Armed Services Committee 2014, 18-19, 35-36) also continued to build its anti-ballistic missile capabilities in the Gulf region, in defense of both U.S. forces and partner nations.

The most important *layer* for the U.S.-Iranian relationship remained CENTCOM's network of allied partners throughout the region. CENTCOM (Austin 2014, 19-34) conducted 52 bilateral and multilateral exercises in the Middle East Region between 2013 and early 2014, some of which were directly focused on countering threats from Iran, and it engaged in "security cooperation" (military equipment sales and training of forces) with states across the region. When the U.S. formed its counter-ISIS coalition (McInnis 2016), it drew support from 66 countries by 2016, including most of Iran's neighbors, but it specifically excluded Iran. As previously mentioned, the U.S. choice of allies made it all but impossible to include Iran, a move that would have been very divisive, especially with the Gulf Arab States. Lastly, the growing cyber conflict between the U.S. and Iran was fueling the development of the U.S. Cyber Command (U.S. Cyber Command 2020), which had been established in 2009 under U.S. Strategic Command but would become its own combatant command in 2018. While Cyber Command was never subordinate to CENTCOM, its focus on the Iranian threat required continual coordination and collaboration between the commands, helping weave the cyber warfare *layer* further into the fabric of the conflict.

Israel's role as a constituent requires little elaboration. Netanyahu led the way, rarely missing an opportunity to thicken the Israeli *layer* of the conflict and campaign for tougher action against Iran. Israel's covert war against Iran died down after 2012, but Netanyahu still repeatedly threatened military action against Iran's nuclear sites. Israel also conducted a number of airstrikes (Sly and Haidamous 2013) (Sly and Haidamous 2014) (Chandler 2015) in Syria throughout the duration of the Syrian civil war, primarily attacking targets associated with Hezbollah, which Iran was directly sponsoring. The domestic politics *layer* came into play in Israel, as well. In March 2015, after addressing the U.S. Congress regarding Iran, Netanyahu's Likud Party won a resounding victory (Staff and AP 2015) in the Israeli election. Netanyahu had based his campaign on security issues including Iran, and his open feud with

Obama apparently helped him instead of hindering him in the Israeli polls. For Netanyahu and his supporters in the U.S., conflict with Iran was eminently useful.

As with previous periods, both sides of the political aisle in Congress largely aligned with Israel, and AIPAC had strong Democratic support. Even still it was Republican loathing of President Obama that truly animated the Congressional effort against Iran, bringing out the domestic politics *layer* of the U.S-Iranian relationship. Inviting the Israeli Prime Minister to address Congress without properly informing the White House, all in a deliberate attempt to undermine a foreign policy negotiation, was more than just a dirty trick in the game of politics. Approximately 60 Democrats (Everett and Kim 2015) refused to show up in protest, and even some who attended made scathing statements afterward. Senator Cotton's letter to the Khamenei was outrageous by any standard of political behavior. It seemed there were few depths to which Republicans were not willing to sink in order to undermine the Obama administration. However, as Parsi (2017, 276, 290-297) described, the Republicans within this constituency also overplayed their hand. By attacking Obama so brazenly over the nuclear program, they actually united many Democrats in support of the President - even those who otherwise might have been supportive of Israel or hawkish on Iran. This came to bear in the final vote mandated by the Corker Bill, and Senate opponents of the JPCOA were not able to vote it down.

The JPCOA was a clear setback for the constituencies interested in perpetuating the U.S.-Iranian conflict. In summary, Obama's secret negotiations created space which allowed the process to gain traction before constituencies could sabotage it. Once these negotiations became public, the convergence of two popular leaders, Obama in the U.S. and Rouhani in Iran, gave the negotiations momentum. Meanwhile, the constituencies on both sides had fallen out of synch with popular opinion, and these leaders capitalized on public sentiment. Finally, by limiting the negotiations to one issue, it removed some of layering that would have complicated a more comprehensive agreement. However,

the limited nature of this agreement also produced as many questions as answers, and this diplomatic success story only temporarily supplanted the morass of institutional forces that continued to work behind the scenes to ensure that this would not result in lasting peace. The constituencies adapted to the new conditions and continued to consolidate their positions behind the scenes on both sides, and as the next section will show, they proved more than sufficient to the task of reversing this positive momentum.

Trump Abrogates the JPCOA

The triumph of the JPCOA was relatively short-lived. While Donald Trump did not immediately abrogate the agreement upon taking office as President, the writing was on all after his election, and it took little more than a year for him to come to this decision. As with Obama's choice to pursue negotiation in a deliberate and serious manner, Trump's personal agency certainly affected the direction of the U.S.-Iranian relationship in a prominent manner. However, this section will argue that the institutional undercurrents of the relationship changed little between administrations; all five constituencies on both sides still benefited from animosity. Even if Obama had somehow been granted a third term of presidency, he would have found that the problems between the U.S. and Iran were far from solved.

Yet the U.S. still maintained a strong interest in Middle East stability, combatting terrorism, and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The American public was little more prepared to take military action against Iran, so cooperation was preferable to conflict. Iran, for its part, desperately needed an economic boost, and a slew of international partners were waiting in the wings to begin investing in Iran. Its leaders had only to avoid antagonizing the Trump administration, and the weight of

world opinion might have conferred a level of legitimacy unseen since the revolution. Instead, both sides reignited the fires that had characterized the relationship from the beginning. This section will explain the demise of the JPCOA and discuss yet another episode in the institutional development of constituencies to the conflict.

What happened?

The 2016 Presidential election was nearly as surprising for the U.S. as Rouhani's 2013 election had been for Iran. Democrat Hillary Clinton, the former Senator and Secretary of State, was widely assumed to be the frontrunner (Cohn 2016) and led the polls even up to election day. With regard to Iran, Clinton was more hawkish than Obama, and she was better at currying favor with the Israeli lobby. Clinton defended the JPCOA (Galston 2015), but she did not believe it would fundamentally alter the relationship between the U.S. and Iran. She believed that the U.S. still needed a comprehensive plan to contain Iranian influence, and regarding Iran's nuclear program, she coined the phrase "distrust but verify."

On the Republican side (Martin and Healy 2016), real estate tycoon-cum-television celebrity Donald J. Trump edged out a historically large field of politically experienced but otherwise uninspiring competitors with a combination of anti-establishment star power and populist appeal. The signing of the JPCOA coincided with the beginning of the campaign season, so Republican candidates across the board competed to criticize the agreement, a clear expression of the domestic politics *layer* of the conflict. Trump (Stokols and Gass 2015) led the way in this effort, calling the JPCOA "catastrophic" and "the single greatest security threat facing America." However, when it came to his intentions as President regarding the JPCOA, candidate Trump (Torbati 2016) gave mixed signals. He said early in his

campaign that he would not "rip up" the agreement but would “police that contract so tough they don’t have a chance,” but he later told an AIPAC audience that he would "dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran." Trump's surprise election in November 2016 immediately put the nuclear agreement into question.

In Iran (Bengali and Mostaghim 2016, Nov 18) (Nov 4), Rouhani suggested that Trump's election would not change the Iranian stance toward the JPCOA and that a change of Presidents would have "no impact on the will of Iran." Hardliners, on the other hand, seized upon Trump's rhetoric to fuel their narrative of U.S. duplicity and malice, a move they had prepared in advance to make. Khamenei accused the U.S. of reneging on the JPCOA as soon as Trump's victory was announced, even before any policy action was even possible. He also said, "Over the past 37 years, any major U.S. party that came to power brought us no good… Their evil was always directed toward the Iranian nation." Hardliners had already started blaming Iran's economic woes on the JPCOA and arguing that newfound openness was exposing Iran’s domestic industries to international exploitation. Rouhani lamented (New York Times 2016) with regard to Trump, "Our hard-liners will pressure him, they are very happy now." However, in spite of mounting conservative opposition to his moderate administration, Rouhani (Erdbrink 2017) still won a landslide victory in his May 2017 reelection bid. He secured 57 percent of the vote with a turnout of more than 70 percent.

Rhetoric aside, Iran was not Trump's first policy priority upon taking office. In addition to struggles in building his cabinet and a scandal that led to the prompt removal of his first National Security Advisor (Haberman 2017), Trump embarked on an aggressive 100-day plan (NPR 2017) to fulfill many of his campaign promises. This laundry list of largely controversial measures included restrictions on immigration from certain countries (popularized as the "Muslim ban"), a U.S. exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (which had not been ratified by Congress yet), and the removal of

restrictions regarding fossil fuels, just to name a few. However, Iran continued its pattern of testing ballistic missiles (Iran Primer 2017a) during this period, a *layer* of the conflict which the Trump administration could not ignore. The administration's initial reaction (Iran Primer 2017b) consisted of applying two rounds of unilateral sanctions against a list of specific entities and individuals associated with Iran's missile program. These lists grew almost monthly throughout 2017, and while the sanctions *layer* had never been fully removed from the relationship, it began thickening again.

When the recertification of Iran's compliance with the JPCOA was due to Congress in April, Trump's administration was not yet prepared to deny it. With some blustery criticism (Harris 2017) and another round of targeted sanctions, they certified the deal. By July of 2017 (Baker 2017), though, Trump's patience with Iran was wearing thin. After a lengthy debate, his national security team convinced him to recertify again, but he demanded an aggressive new strategy for dealing with Iran, also unilaterally announcing (Calamur 2017) new sanctions. In October, Trump (Landler and Sanger 2017) chose not to certify Iran to Congress, stating that he would not restore certification until a new agreement was reached that permanently prevented Iran from gaining either a nuclear weapon or an intercontinental ballistic missile (an issue not covered by the JPCOA). This did not formally end the agreement, but it put the onus on Congress to decide whether or not to reimpose the original sanctions regime. Amidst the swirling international controversy over Trump's decision, Congress did not act on the move.

Two months later, events unfolded in Iran which further aggravated the human rights *layer* of the conflict, in addition to the JPCOA. In late December 2017 (Dehghan and Graham-Harrison 2017), protests erupted across at approximately 72 Iranian cities. While smaller than the 2009 protests and lacking in central coordination, the breadth of the unrest was unprecedented. Some analysts (Asadzade 2018) (Fathollah-Nejad 2020) claimed that hardliners had orchestrated the original protests to

undermine the Rouhani administration, but these quickly took on a life of their own and became a vehicle for channeling pent up frustrations across the country. Focused primarily on economic issues and quality of life, the protestors widely chanted slogans directed against Khamenei himself.

Iranian security forces (Karimi and Gambrell 2018) (Bayet 2018) cracked down violently on the protests, killing at least 25 people and arresting approximately 3,700, many of whom would face severe convictions. Quick to stir the pot, Trump (Diaz and Merica 2018) sent a series of tweets accusing the Iranian government of oppressing its people and arguing that it was "time for change" in Iran. This only fueled Khamenei's (Karimi and Gambrell 2018) narrative that the protests were entirely the product of foreign plots attempting to undermine the regime. It is unclear if this period of unrest emboldened Trump's final decision with regard to the JPCOA, but it fueled speculation that the Iranian regime was vulnerable and made Iran a tempting target for hawks within the administration.

Meanwhile, Trump's own proclivities were turning more hawkish. In December 2017 (Holland and Lubell 2017), Trump gifted Netanyahu by reversing decades of U.S. policy and formally recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. While unrelated to Iran, it was an unmistakable signal that the U.S. was aligning its foreign policy in favor of the Israeli Likud government. In March 2018, Trump (Landler and Haberman 2018) replaced his National Security Advisor, H.R. McMaster, and his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. Both had consistently advocated restraint in dealing with Iran and favored remaining in the JPCOA. Their replacements, John Bolton as National Security Advisor and Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, both advocated a hard line against Iran, apparently believing that Iran's clerical leaders were vulnerable to pressure.

In May 2018 (Landler 2018), after months of angst and speculation, Trump formally announced that the U.S. was abandoning the JPCOA. His administration acknowledged that Iran was in compliance with the agreement, but stated that JPCOA itself was "fatally flawed." Trump also cited his campaign

promises in abrogating the deal. Predictably, the move drew criticism from around the globe, but especially from the European signatories to the bill, who vowed to remain within the agreement. The ensuing rift between the U.S. and Europe (Norman 2020) led to months of wrangling as the U.S. unilaterally imposed secondary sanctions, making it difficult for the European businesses to continue dealing with Iran, and Europe even set up a financial vehicle for circumventing those sanctions. Its success remains to be seen as of this writing.

In Iran, the reaction to Trump's formal abrogation of the JPCOA was bifurcated between the subdued tone of President Rouhani (Landler 2018), who vowed to stay in the deal, and hardliners who increased their threats and rhetoric against the U.S. In a dramatic display (Cunningham and Sabbagh 2018) typical of the rhetorical *layer* of the conflict, Iranian lawmakers set fire to the U.S. flag and a copy of the JPCOA in Parliament. Hardliners also demanded Rouhani's resignation. The day after Trump's announcement (Kershner and Halbfinger 2018), Iranian forces in Syria launched 20 rockets at targets in Israel. Israel retaliated with their largest and most overt campaign of airstrikes yet into Syrian territory. However, perhaps in a bid to continue currying favor with Europe, Iran (Dehganpisheh 2019) waited an entire year to announce the restart of its nuclear program, and even then, it did not pull completely out of the JPCOA. By the end of 2019 (Wolgolenter and Sanger, 2019), Iran moved even further from the deal and resumed a significant portion of its enrichment activities. After four decades, the U.S. and Iran were still adversaries, with little end in sight.

The institutional development of constituencies

One of the drawbacks of electoral politics is that political leaders are often time-constrained and forced to build their legacies on short-term gains. The JPCOA was a significant accomplishment for

Obama and Rouhani, but it did not fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship between the U.S. and Iran, nor did it rebuild the incentive structure for the constituents to the conflict. It established the precedent that diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran was possible, but the agreement itself had shallow roots based in the shifting sands of political expediency. The layers of conflict continued to grow even as the JPCOA was negotiated, and they did not stop iteratively shaping the conflict afterward.

The clerical establishment, led by Khamenei, apparently hedged its bets all along on the failure of the JPCOA, energizing the domestic politics *layer* of the conflict in Iran. After successfully foisting responsibility for the deal on Rouhani and his supporters, the hardliners were free to criticize their opponents at every juncture while simultaneously undermining the agreement. Western analysts (Barnato 2015) correctly predicted that the JPCOA would not immediately solve most of Iran's economic problems, but they were not entirely correct in their assumption that this would stir the Iranian people to hold their government accountable for the country's underlying problems. Instead, the clerical establishment turned the argument around and blamed the JPCOA, along with Rouhani's administration. This did not work as well as they might have hoped. Whether or not conservatives literally sparked the 2017 unrest themselves, they did actively promote protests against the president, and the backlash they unleashed targeted Khamenei, himself. Alas, since 2009, the clerical establishment had honed its repressive apparatus, and it proved more than adequately prepared to stifle active dissent. There was no need to change strategies, as Rouhani's reputation and influence was on the decline anyway, much like Khatami's had in the early 2000's, when hardliners regained the initiative the first time. The Trump administration provided Khamenei with all the ammunition it needed to scapegoat the U.S. for Iran's problems and perpetuate a 40-year pattern of action.

The IRGC and clerical security forces played an especially sinister role as a constituent during this period, probably in conjunction with the most hardline elements of the clerical establishment. First,

knowing that the JPCOA provided no effective limitations with regard to ballistic missiles, the IRGC (BBC News 2016) (Iran Primer 2017a) (Staff 2018) brazenly and aggressively tested and expanded its missile arsenal. The IRGC reacted defiantly to each new iteration of stepwise sanctions, making a point of escalating the conflict with each new test, deliberately thickening the ballistic missile *layer* of the conflict. Second, absent an active nuclear program, the IRGC (Jones 2016) (Eisenstadt 2016) placed an increasing priority on its cyber warfare capabilities, another key *layer*. After the conclusion of the nuclear deal, they stepped up their hacking program aimed at monitoring the activities of U.S. and other Western officials, journalists, and dissidents. They engaged in a brief 2016 cyber battle with Saudi Arabia. More disturbing than their known operations, though, Iranian hackers became more sophisticated and harder to track at all. Iran was reportedly spending $1 billion per year by 2016 on its cyber program, half as much as the United Kingdom. Cyber experts increasingly placed Iran in the same league as China and Russia, citing complex multi-year penetrations of various systems worldwide, based on indigenously produced codes. Third, the IRGC continued to increase its regional influence, especially in supporting for the Assad Regime in Syria and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, along with its high-profile role in fighting ISIS.

Fourth, Iran's security forces targeted dual-national citizens with a campaign of arbitrary arrests and detention, bringing to mind the hostage-taking *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Iran does not recognize dual nationality, and since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, travelling back to Iran has always carried some degree of risk and uncertainty for expatriates. The controversial detention of the five American prisoners, including journalist Jason Rezaian (Morello, et al. 2016) released in 2016 testified to this fact. However, after the prisoner swap, at the height of expectations for improved relations, the security services started taking a new batch of dual-national political prisoners. Between 2015 and 2017 (Nada, et al. 2020), the IRGC arrested at least 30 dual nationals, 19 of whom had European citizenship. This included at least four U.S. citizens. In 2018, Iran arrested two more U.S. Citizens. In a September

2017 interview with CNN, Rouhani hinted that he disagreed with these detentions, however, he stated that Iran had an independent judiciary, and he had no power over them. The same month, Donald Trump raised the issue of political prisoners in Iran at the U.N. General Assembly. Former captive Jason Rezaian (2019) described this systematic practice of arrests as a "hostage factory." Iranians learned the value of hostage-taking in the 1980's, and they have not forgotten. This practice brings back painful memories for the U.S. and works as an extremely corrosive *layer* of the conflict.

In 2016, General Joseph Votel replaced General Austin as the Commander of CENTCOM, demonstrating a new iteration of *drift* in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. Unlike Mattis, two iterations before, who had a reputation as hawkish on Iran, Votel was known as an even-handed intellectual. However, Votel (2017) stated in his 2017 annual posture statement before Congress, "Iran poses the most significant threat to the Central Region and to our national interests and the interests of our partners and allies." He also categorized them as the, "greatest long-term threat," and he stated that Iran's behavior had become more provocative since the signing of the JPCOA. This language was even less equivocal than any his predecessors had employed. It also likely reflected a change, not only in Iran's behavior but the strategic picture as the U.S. saw it. The fight against ISIS, which to some degree had *displaced* Iran as the primary threat within the region, was CENTCOM's priority as a shooting war. However, the anti-ISIS coalition was ascendant, and victory was within sight. Over the course of 2017 (Glenn, et al. 2019), the coalition ejected ISIS from Iraq, and the next year ISIS was all but defeated in Syria.

As for CENTCOM's other remaining shooting war in Afghanistan, the newly elected President Trump (Pramuk 2017) had vowed to bring the troops home, and remaining troops were largely relegated to supporting indigenous Afghan forces. As *displacement and conversion* operated on CENTCOM's outlook within the region, Iran was poised to return to the U.S. cross hairs from an

institutional perspective as well as a strategic choice. Additionally, with the regional drawdown of U.S. forces on the near horizon, CENTCOM was more dependent on its regional partners to protect U.S. national interests. As Votel (2017) stated, "Stronger, more capable partners, able and willing to assume a greater role in countering Iran, will serve to further enhance deterrence and improve stability in the region." These regional partners were all aligned against and increasingly threatened by Iran, so the *layer* presented by this security architecture inevitably thickened. Every aspect of CENTCOM's chosen mission and strategy relied on animosity against Iran. There was simply no room for a cooperative approach.

As with the previous period, Israel's constituency to the conflict requires little elaboration. Netanyahu continued as Prime Minister, bolstered by his 2015 reelection, and defined Israeli external interests largely by opposition to a nuclear Iran. AIPAC (2018) continued to campaign against the JPCOA, arguing that it would facilitate a nuclear-armed Iran. After almost completely alienating the Obama administration (Freedman 2020, 147-152) through support for unauthorized settlements in Palestinian territory and opposition to the JPCOA, Trump's election was a welcome gift to Netanyahu. The two leaders quickly hit things off when Trump invited him to the White House, shortly after his inauguration. Trump cautioned Netanyahu against enflaming the conflict with the Palestinians through further settlements, but he also backed away from previous U.S. insistence on a "two-state solution." Ultimately, Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and his abrogation of the JPCOA played almost perfectly into Netanyahu's policies. The Israel *layer* was as thick as ever in the U.S.-Iranian conflict. Also, while Israel can hardly be blamed for its massive retaliatory strikes against Iranian forces in Syria in May 2018, this indirectly served to aggravate tensions between the U.S. and Iran, as well.

Congress's role as a constituent to the conflict highlighted the domestic politics *layer* of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. After losing the fight to prevent the JPCOA from being implemented, even Republicans were divided on whether Trump should abandon the treaty. Senators like Jeff Flake (Carney 2018) argued that abandoning the treaty would alienate key U.S. allies. While the Trump administration imposed new Executive Branch sanctions after decertifying Iran and abrogating the treaty, Congress did not follow suit. However, Congress did impose sanctions on Iran prior to these decisions during Trump's first year as President. In July 2017, the U.S. Congress (2017) passed a bill that sanctioned a number of actors related to Iran, North Korea, and Russia. It specifically targeted Iran's ballistic missile program, and attacked the IRGC more broadly. The bill passed the House (Iran Primer 2017b) with a vote of 419-3 and the Senate with a vote of 98-2.

What this bipartisan support concealed was an effort by Congressional Democrats to overtly punish Russia for its meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and concurrently embarrass Trump by forcing him to publicly walk back his own support for Russian President Vladimir Putin. A bill focused exclusively on Russia would likely have faced partisan controversy and a potential veto. Packaging Russia with Iran and North Korea was a similar strategy to George W. Bush's packaging Iraq with the same two partners in the Axis of Evil speech in 2002. Voting against the bill would have been perceived as a vote for America's worst adversaries. On the other hand, there is no indication that Congress would have bothered to pass a bill exclusive to Iran, had not Russia generated a politically useful scandal. Conflict between the U.S. and Iran again became a convenient weapon in the domestic political fight, as it had so many times before.

As with George W. Bush, Trump played his own hand in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. However, as this dissertation has shown, path dependency dealt the cards, based upon years of *layering*. Trump was able to capitalize on hostility against Iran because the constituencies had provided a political

base to which he could appeal. Without this foundation, there would have been little incentive for him to antagonize Iran. Likewise, in Iran, the clerical establishment and IRGC leaders found new and more exciting ways to play same game that had been bolstering their position since 1979. Conflict with the U.S. was useful, while peace was expensive and potentially destabilizing.

Conclusion

Had the story of this fourth decade ended with the implementation of the JPCOA, the concept of institutional animosity might have been called into question. However, the fundamental assumption of the institutional lens is that, like tectonic plates, the forces that direct history take time and pressure to make themselves understood. Agreements like the JPCOA are possible when the right factors, usually great statesmen (the women and men of history), align with favorable conditions. However, until the corresponding plates that underlie the conflict shift their position, changes in trajectory are short-lived. With four decades of troubled history, it hardly required a new theory to predict that the animosity between the U.S. and Iran would not simply evaporate because of a controversial agreement signed by diplomats in Europe. The utility of this theoretical exercise has been to articulate and explain what others sensed by intuition and experience.

An institution of animosity is not simply produced by a convergence of conditions. Conflict can result (and often does) from unfortunate and unpredictable combinations of events, but this does not create an institution, nor does it make the conflict intractable. When bad luck continues for decades, it requires a new explanation. The five constituencies to the U.S.-Iranian conflict were not just five actors who happened to follow their interest at given points in time to the detriment of their own societies. These constituencies developed reproducible values that translated past experience into future patterns

of action, and they interacted with each other in a dynamic manner to form a system which perpetuated bad luck, regardless of the conditions that arose. Transient actors like Obama and Rouhani found themselves fighting against forces that could not only outlast them, but could subtly and consistently undermine their best efforts at transformational change.

On the other hand, one should not discount the transformational power of an agreement like the JPCOA. If institutions endure through a constant process of renewal and change, this cannot help but to have had some effect. The JPCOA may not have altered the relationship in a visible sense, but it introduced new pressures on the tectonic plates. Just as conflict can find its way to the center of the habitus carried social groups, it can also find its way out as new patterns and interests slowly supplant the old. Kupchan (2010) explained that diplomacy often fails its way to success, with each new breakthrough changing the precedent that guides future attempts. No conflict lasts forever, so intractability is an inherently temporary condition. The ultimate success or failure of the JPCOA may not be apparent for years or even decades, and Obama's (or Rouhani's) "legacy" could have less to do with the specifics of a nuclear program and more lasting effects on the relationship itself.

CHAPTER 7 – ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The preceding chapters have traced the institutional development of the conflict between the U.S. and Iran over the space of four decades. Certain aspects of this sordid tale are unique, or at least extraordinary in comparison with other conflicts. Every conflict has distinctive characteristics because individual leaders or collective personalities place their own imprints on them. However, this dissertation contends that the U.S.-Iranian relationship provides a wealth of generalizable insights into how international conflict becomes intractable. To mine these insights, it has proposed an institutional lens for evaluating conflict, which traces the development of constituencies over time. These constituencies exhibit their own institutional characteristics and subordinate themselves on both sides of the conflict to a larger institution of animosity, serving to perpetuate hostility even against the interests of the larger societies involved. These processes take long periods of time to play out, and even when changes appear suddenly, they are usually enabled by an incremental evolution operating under the surface, prior to the event. This dissertation has conducted a multi-generational evaluation of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, focusing on periods in which cooperation or rapprochement were possible, and found that history generally supports these claims.

This chapter will discuss the findings produced by applying the institutional lens to the U.S.-Iranian conflict. It will begin with a theoretical review of the relationship between institutions and conflict intractability. It will recap the case study of the U.S.-Iranian relationship as a story told in institutional terms. The chapter will then explore some of the key observations that became apparent throughout the study and consider their implications for intractable conflict. Next, it will evaluate the performance and efficiency of the model itself. Finally, it will contemplate avenues for future research into the application of institutional theory within the study of conflict.

Institutions of Animosity – A Lens for Explaining Intractability

This dissertation has contended that conflict becomes intractable because it develops institutional properties, becoming an institution of animosity. This happens when constituencies form on both sides that have the power to help perpetuate hostility. That said, intractability is not the product of some conspiracy, nor is it the result of collusion on the part of the actors involved. Human plans and intentions rarely produce such durability, even in the best of cases. Instead, the conflict ingrains itself into the very fabric of social order.

Social groups develop around a shared habitus, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a collective consciousness which encodes experience from the past and carries it into the future, propagating values and interests which endure in the face of change. The secret to longevity, paradoxically, derives from the ability of the habitus to incorporate new inputs and evolve constantly. In doing so, it serves as a buffer between social groups and events, slowing the pace of change and shaping the environment in its own image whenever possible. This construct is the root of all human institutions. New ideas and realities find their way into the habitus of a social group slowly, but once rooted, they can be very difficult to change.

Interstate conflict is just one of the many changing situations that can alter the habitus of a social group. Most disputes are resolved relatively quickly (in a matter of a few years or less), and they never have the opportunity to shape the habitus of the societies involved before they are supplanted by new priorities and distractions. However, just as time and pressure create new geologic realities by moving the tectonic plates under the surface of the earth, hostility acts as the pressure which can alter a habitus over time. Groups exposed to a conflict can begin to reorder their values and define their interests in opposition to a particular foe, with lasting effect. This usually starts with tactical decisions

made for short-term gain, where a group finds particular utility in stoking the fires of conflict. When these behaviors succeed, they develop into habitual pattern of actions. Thus, the conflict develops constituencies.

Constituencies are institutions, but they do not individually constitute an institution of animosity. As the saying goes, *it takes two to tango*. The modern international system provides enough accountability that, in many cases, if one side displays little interest in confrontation, there are mechanisms that will facilitate de-escalation. For a conflict to assume institutional properties, it must develop constituencies on both sides that have the power to influence events. Once this takes place, the conflict penetrates the habitus of conflicting groups in a similar fashion, creating a commonality among foes. It also generates synergy because the actions of each group feed off of the other, ensuring that cycle of hostility continues and undermining efforts at reconciliation. Further, with more constituencies present, they can pick up for each other should one fail or its members become distracted by other issues.

Constituencies to a conflict are sub-divisions of a larger society. The question of whether a dispute aligns with the broader interests of a particular society is often academic, but it is undeniable that conflict is costly from a variety of standpoints. For most conflicts that are widely recognized as intractable, there is a prominent argument that protracted hostility deviates from the interests of society, and it is perpetuated primarily by the few, namely constituencies. Constituencies, of course, take the lead in countering this view, arguing that their view alone truly represents the masses. A conflict does not necessarily have to run perpendicular to societal interest in order to become institutional, but the greater the apparent deviation, the easier it will be to detect institutional influences.

Finally, institutional theory provides insights into how this process plays out. Historical Institutionalism explains how the habitus of a social group is manipulated and describes mechanisms by which constituencies are formed. Institutionalization is an intangible concept that is difficult to measure or assess. These mechanisms, therefore, provide markers that can be identified and traced, offering a lens into a concept that is often invoked but less often explored. This dissertation has utilized these mechanisms to examine the development of constituencies to the U.S.-Iranian conflict, and it has demonstrated that synergy has increased as the five key constituencies have internalized the conflict in institutional fashion, making the conflict intractable by almost any definition of the term.

The U.S.-Iranian Relationship – An Institutional Story

This dissertation has argued that the U.S.-Iranian relationship from 1979-2018 provided an ideal test case for the argument that intractable conflict is caused by institutional forces. Chapter 1 examined the costs that the conflict has imposed on each of the two societies, costs that may not have been apparent in the moment, but which compounded considerably over the course of time. The analysis also stepped back from ideological and tit-for-tat grievances, showing that the most common arguments for continued animosity provide little utility in terms in serving greater national interests on either side. Each decade of the conflict then showed that societal leaders in both the U.S. and Iran repeatedly attempted to reduce hostility between the parties, only to be stymied by forces seemingly beyond their control.

At the start of the conflict, in 1979 and the early 1980's, Iran's new leaders apparently never envisioned a permanent rift with the U.S. Hostility was convenient in the moment and became an entrenched pattern. The Reagan administration, focused on the Cold War, envisioned rapprochement

with post-Khomeini Iran until the Iran-Contra scandal soured these hopes. In 1989 and the early 1990's, presidents George H. W. Bush and Hashemi Rafsanjani both courted each other until new priorities intervened. Bill Clinton attempted to pick up where Bush had left off in bringing Iran back to the fold, then after the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, he redoubled his efforts. Khatami initiated a new level of engagement with the West, but again fell short in garnering meaningful change.

George W. Bush started out ambivalent toward Iran in 2001 but begrudgingly accepted Iranian help in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks. In the coming years, even Supreme Leader Khamenei demonstrated an apparent change of heart, proffering the suggestion of a "grand bargain," only to be rebuffed. During Bush's second term, the tables were turned, and the U.S. offered Iran significant concessions for a halt in its nuclear program, to little avail. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made overtures (however misguided) toward the West during both terms in office, despite his rhetoric. Obama's outreach to Iran, while troubled at first, resulted in the only significant diplomatic breakthrough between the opponents in 40 years. Hassan Rouhani was a major factor in securing this victory. Even Donald Trump, who abrogated the historic agreement, claimed to do so in order to bring Iran back to the table for a better agreement. In summary, there was never a period between 1979 and 2018 when key leaders on one or both sides of the U.S.-Iranian relationship did not recognize an interest in reducing hostility. Hostility continued, nevertheless.

Understanding why this tragic pattern unfolded requires an understanding of the constituencies that ultimately perpetuated the conflict. Constituencies on the Iranian side manifested earlier, as Iran initiated the conflict. In spite of his rhetoric, confrontation with the U.S. did not appear to be an early priority for Khomeini until it became useful in vanquishing his domestic rivals. The sudden fall of the Shah placed the clerics at risk of becoming victims of their own success, and they needed a bogeyman to rally against. The clerical establishment seized upon confrontation with the U.S. and used radicalism as

a form of currency, first against their opponents, then in competition with each other. This was never intended to place Iran in a permanent state of international isolation, but the train had left the station. Clerical radicalism layered against a host of issues and events over the coming decades, creating path dependency. Many leaders recognized an Iranian interest in reducing hostility, but it was rarely in the best interest of an individual cleric to be the one to break ranks and push for change. There were almost always political or economic gains to be had by stirring the fire. Rafsanjani came arguably the closest to breaking the cycle, wielding power in a time of transition, but his own clerical establishment fought his efforts.

The IRGC and clerical security forces were born of the clerical establishment – young foot soldiers who supported Khomeini but had little else going for them in Iranian society. They built a complete military force (with land, air, naval, special operations, and intelligence) from the ground up in competition with Iran's regular forces (which still persist to this day). This force seized upon Khomeini's most radical doctrines and used confrontation with the U.S. as its raison d'etre. The Iran-Iraq War provided the impetus to build the force, but they required a larger cause to justify the continued expansion of their power and influence. In 40 years, they rarely missed an opportunity to jab the U.S., either directly or indirectly (often through proxies or attacks on Israel). In the pattern of the clerical establishment, they frequently rewarded bold, radical initiative and rarely punished misguided action. The IRGC added numerous layers to the conflict, most importantly involving terrorism, threats against Israel, and the country's nuclear program. Far from feeling the negative consequences of their actions, the IRGC finished its first 40 years as the rarely disputed power behind the regime in Tehran.

Constituencies took longer to develop on the U.S. side, as America struggled to come to terms with its loss of a key ally in the Middle East. As traumatic as the hostage crisis was for the U.S. population, Cold War exigencies ruled the day, and some held out hope that the fall of the Shah would

only be a bump in the road the U.S. relationship with Tehran. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) was the first constituency on the U.S. side. It owed its formation largely to the U.S. inability to react militarily to the hostage crisis and to the perceived Soviet threat against Iran. CENTCOM's top priority changed multiple times over the years, but Iran remained a constant, never failing to occupy a prominent position on the command's radar. The fall of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War positioned CENTCOM as America's premier combatant command, and the Iranian threat helped to bolster this position in the face of shifting policy priorities and geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Even as the U.S. military downsized, CENTCOM found itself on the winning end of the competition for resources. Perhaps most importantly, CENTCOM became the vanguard of U.S. foreign policy in this part of the world. Beginning in the early 1980's, the U.S. constructed a network of partnerships and alliances across the greater Middle East. The lynchpin of this regional order was opposition to Iran, and any possible rapprochement with Iran risked the stability of the entire enterprise.

The state of Israel began this story as ally of Iran. Clinging to their periphery doctrine, which advocated building alliances with countries outside the immediate ring of adversarial neighbors, its leaders believed that a semi-covert relationship with Iran remained feasible after the fall of the Shah. Israel supported Iran in its war with Iraq, and it even helped facilitate the transactions that led to the Iran-Contra Affair. Iran, however, provided little in return except for measured hostility. As Israel's chief patron, the U.S., turned more overtly against Iran, the periphery doctrine finally lost salience. With the end of the Cold War and the U.S. defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War, Israel found itself in a new position of strength vis-à-vis its neighbors. However, it now faced an international community, led by the U.S., which expected it to come to terms with the Palestinians. It also risked becoming less important as the U.S. build ties with the Persian Gulf States. Iran became useful again, this time as an adversary. From that point forward, Israeli leaders touted Iran as an existential threat and did everything in their power to focus U.S. attention on opposition to the Islamic Republic. Within the U.S., the American Israeli

Political Action Committee (AIPAC) drew new energy from this conflict and became Israel's best weapon against Iran, influencing U.S. politicians at all levels. There have been few, if any openings for peace between the U.S. and Iran that Israeli leaders have not actively undermined.

The U.S. Congress took longer to develop as a constituency, but the seeds of bipartisan opposition to Iran were sown at an early stage. Democrats blamed Iran for the downfall of the Carter administration. While they often opposed Reagan's foreign policy in the Middle East (mainly on partisan grounds), once the Iran-Contra scandal developed, they seized upon the Iranian angle as a political weapon. This public censure helped to harden Reagan's position against Iran, leading to the Tanker War in 1997 and 1998, which neither Republicans nor Democrats did much to oppose. By the end of the first decade, Iran had staunch opponents on both sides of the political aisle, reducing the freedom of maneuver for both Bush and Clinton in the next decade. The U.S. Congress arguably reached a point of no return when Republicans took control of both houses in the 1994 mid-term election. Taking a page from their democratic colleagues during the Iran-Contra Affair, Republican leaders relentlessly attacked the Clinton administration over Iran. Congressional Democrats well understood the danger of appearing soft on Iran, and they followed suit, removing any space for compromise with Iran. From that point forward, congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle began competing with the White House to criticize and sanction Iran at every possible turn.

With the transformation of Congress into an active constituency circa 1995, the conflict between the U.S. and Iran took its final form as an institution of animosity. Influenced heavily by the Israeli lobby and the model of world order that CENTCOM was increasingly propagating and exemplifying, Congress brought a new level of power to the U.S. side of the constituency ledger. Dating the inception of an institution is always a tricky prospect, but constituencies provide a semi-tangible marker that is easier to trace. Through the 1980's and early 1990's it was still possible that a different

combination of decisions or events might have changed the direction of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. However, by 1995, the conflict had powerful constituencies on both sides, and intractability became inevitable.

In telling the institutional story of these constituencies, it is important to reemphasize the point that hostility was not the product of some back-room conspiracy with a long-term strategic plan to perpetuate conflict between the U.S. and Iran. CENTCOM's commanders, for instance, probably never viewed themselves as agents of a plot to sow hostility with Iran. As far as they were concerned, they acted in the best interest of U.S. national security, but their perception was also filtered through an organization whose very roots derived from confrontation with Iran. From these roots, successive commanders constructed a modern reality by building a regional order antithetical to peace with Iran. This construct produced a worldview that could not allow for anything but conflict, and CENTCOM's actions directly challenged Iran's view of its own sovereignty and national security.

Being more bellicose in their rhetoric, it might be easier to blame Iranian leaders for deliberately provoking conflict with the U.S. Perhaps this is warranted to some extent, but did U.S. policy in the Middle East directly threaten Iran? Of course it did. Various facets of U.S. foreign policy threatened Iran during almost every period of the 40 years under question. IRGC leaders could therefore claim to be acting in Iran's national interest by doing exactly what their organization was programmed to do – oppose the U.S. So could leaders within the clerical establishment. Turning back to the U.S. side, Congressional leaders claimed they were protecting U.S. interests by opposing Iran, and the Israelis painted the very existence of the Islamic Republic as a threat to their own security.

In summary, every constituency acted in the national interest of its own side according to a particular worldview. Within this construct, actors could fully rationalize the pursuit of their own interests as well. Yet each constituency was actively perpetuating a conflict that increasingly diverged

from the interest of the societies from which they hailed. This is an example of the synergy generated by an institution of animosity. Each constituency did exactly what it was influenced by its habitus to do, and the resulting actions fed a continuous cycle of provocation that fueled intractable conflict.

Sometimes constituencies directly undermined opportunities for rapprochement, but more often they acted indirectly by poisoning the waters in other aspects of the relationship. When viewed in isolation from each other, outcomes often appeared to be cases of bad timing or bad luck regarding the surrounding events[5], but these breakdowns did not happen arbitrarily. Considering the conflict over four decades, it is difficult to assign consistent outcomes to the vagaries of fortune. Constituencies to the conflict ensured that it was virtually impossible for leaders on either side to make an overture toward the other without some member of either camp (often their own) throwing more kindling on the fire.

What Did the Model Reveal About Intractable Conflict?

The advantage of covering a 40-year time period for a single case is that this birds-eye view reveals patterns that get lost in the details of a shorter study. This section will start with observations most closely related to the argument of this dissertation. It will then consider observations that relate this work to rational choice approaches. It will revisit the insights of Jack Snyder (1991), first discussed in Chapter 1. Finally, it will discuss the role of individual leaders in the process of institutional development.

[5] This is the theme of the story that authors like Barbara Slavin (2007) narrated when looking at smaller periods of time.

Institutional observations

The application of this institutional model to the U.S.-Iranian conflict suggests a number of key points with regard to intractable conflict. Starting with some general observations, it shows that a conflict can become intractable while nobody is looking. The U.S.-Iranian conflict reached its institutional form during one of the least contentious periods in four decades. Institutional forces are always at work. They are not always making a conflict intractable, but they do not have to be obvious in order to do so. Another general observation is that constituencies to a conflict need not be self-aware, and many are not. There was no conspiracy to perpetuate the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. If one were to interview a member of a constituency, they might very tell you that they desire a peaceful resolution as quickly as possible. In fact, even the most hawkish leaders of constituencies to the U.S.-Iran conflict have expressed a preference for peace and cooperation, and when speaking in abstract terms, there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. Some are more self-aware than others, and Iran's leaders have occasionally acknowledged the value of fostering an external enemy, but there was no collusion in this effort by the U.S. side. Even internally, Iran's constituencies have been too fractious to sow hostility in a centralized fashion. It is the nature of the institution that constituencies act as though they form a concerted effort, even when they clearly do not.

The next observation is one that leads to the supposition of a general rule: the more broadly the institutional process of *layering* operates upon a conflict, the more likely it is to become intractable. The preceding chapters showed layering to be the most common institutional process at work, and this should be expected. Institutions are sticky by nature, so *displacement and conversion* are unusual events. *Drift* may happen continuously, but it requires long periods of time to recognize the shifting baselines. *Exhaustion* happens rarely, and it leads to the death or dismemberment of an institution. *Layering*, on the other hand, happens all the time by simple virtue of the fact that institutions are not

discrete. Constituencies are made of people who overlap with other institutions. Further, institutions operate in an external environment and react to events they do not control, causing them to internalize new issues. While layering may be inevitable, though, the scope of the issues it connects is not always broad.

In the U.S.-Iranian conflict, the breadth of the issues drawn into the same basket was extreme. Domestic power struggles in every corner, nuclear weapons, terrorism, hostages, human rights, sanctions, opposition to Israel, and a mistakenly shot-down airliner were just a sample of the many issues that became bundled together in a single international conflict. Proponents of the "grand bargain" approach to conflict resolution acknowledge this challenge, not incorrectly believing that a multiplicity of issues complicates the development of a resolution that will satisfy all parties. In the U.S.-Iranian relationship it did more than this, though. *Layering* is more than just multiplying variables in an equation, and constituencies are not really interested in solving the equation, anyway. Returning to the physics analogy of Chapter 2, *layering* increases the gravitational pull of the conflict in attracting and binding constituencies. Not only were a broader range of parties interested in the U.S.-Iranian conflict, but their menu of grievances expanded. If one issue lost salience, another would take its place in an endless cycle of excuses for continued hostility. A general rule that a wider breadth of *layering* increases the degree of conflict intractability might be debatable, but it is also testable. Future work could test this rule as a hypothesis by comparing the breadth of layering as it operated across multiple conflicts.

A warped incentive structure

This dissertation contends that the institutional lens for examining intractable conflict is not a replacement for all other lenses but acts in a complimentary manner with some of them. The most

prominent of these is rational choice, and the examination of four decades revealed that constituencies to the U.S.-Iranian conflict operated rationally within the confines of the worldviews they developed and propagated. Considering the concept of rational choice in light of this study reveals an important observation, though, which does not become apparent when considering shorter periods in isolation. Over the course of the conflict, the cost of joining a constituency (and ultimately the institution of animosity) was consistently low, and the cost of leaving was high. Constituencies also based their decisions almost invariably on short-term interest calculations, usually rooted in domestic struggles, at the expense of the bigger picture. This fostered a warped incentive structure that favored hostility in most cases. How did this incentive structure come into being, and why were constituencies able to get away with this for so long?

As discussed in the first chapter, both the U.S. and Iran have paid a high price for their mutual hostility, but their societies have borne the cost, not the constituencies. Many of these costs have been diffuse, and both societies became conditioned to them over time, starting early in the conflict. The populations of the U.S. and Iran, therefore, have put remarkably little pressure on their political leaders to change the course of the relationship. One might counter that oppression has silenced the voices of ordinary Iranians, who hold little sway over their government, as compared to U.S. citizens. However, Iranians have a long history of courageous dissent (usually over domestic political or economic issues), even under the Islamic Republic, and the government has not been entirely unresponsive to domestic pressure. The bottom line is that constituencies have operated in the U.S.-Iranian relationship with relative impunity. There have been few incentives to take the political risks required to better relations, and the short-term rewards for stoking hostility have often been appealing.

Perhaps the strongest explanation for this warped incentive structure is the simple point that neither the U.S. nor Iran have presented an existential threat to the other. Operation Eagle Claw, the

failed rescue attempt of the U.S. hostages in 1980 helped to illustrate just how difficult it really is to project force into Iranian territory. Few argue that the U.S. ever lacked the capability to invade and conquer Iran if it were required, but the costs would always have been enormous. U.S. leaders never seriously contemplated such a move except in the Cold War context of a potential World War III with the Soviet Union. Even during the most heated moment between the adversaries, when naval forces engaged in open combat during the Tanker War (1987-1988), Reagan deliberately stopped short of authorizing attacks inland of the Iranian shoreline. One could point out that some hawkish neoconservatives called for a follow-on invasion of Iran as the U.S. prepared for its 2003 invasion of Iraq, but this amounted to little more than loose talk, quickly squelched by the realities of an actual war. Lastly, the U.S. would never have used nuclear weapons against Iran except in response to a nuclear attack, and Iran did not develop this capability. The Iranians, for their part, had little means to significantly threaten the U.S. homeland, and as Chapter 1 explained, even their threat to Israel was far short of existential. Iran's nuclear program was troubling, but it amounted to a "tomorrow problem," not one that was ever realized during the 40 years under study.

Some might go as far as to describe the conflict between the U.S. and Iran as a "phony war." U.S. responses to Iranian provocations were consistently strong on rhetoric but tepid, at best, in action. Aside from sanctions, the U.S. never actually retaliated for the hostage crisis of 1979-1981. Reagan did nothing against Iran in retaliation for the attacks in Lebanon. He responded to the taking of hostages by negotiating with Iran to buy them back. It is true that the U.S. inflicted some casualties during the Tanker War, but these paled in comparison to the losses that Iran was simultaneously absorbing on land at the hands of Saddam Hussein, only a few short miles to the north. A decade later, Clinton chose not to retaliate for Iran's role in the Khobar Towers bombing, instead obscuring the evidence of their responsibility. George W. Bush was tough on Iran, yet the U.S. military largely failed to retaliate for Iran's proxy war in Iraq. When it did, it confined its reaction to the proxies and Iranian agents physically

located on Iraqi soil. Obama all but invited Iran into Syria and Yemen through waffling policies that failed to address the problems growing in those countries. Across these decades, the U.S. employed all manner of sanctions and international pressure, but the constituencies in Iran largely flourished under this type of siege.

Iran's war against the U.S. has been, in some ways, just as phony. Its attacks in Lebanon were arguably its greatest blow against the "Great Satan," but they did not really constitute retaliation for anything. They were opportunistic moves by a radical section of a nascent constituency looking to build their own power and prestige by embarrassing the U.S. The mining of the *USS Bridgeton* and the subsequent Tanker War fell into the same category, but with less actual effect. Iranian actions in the naval campaign were largely pyrrhic show of defiance, intended to glorify the IRGC more than really hurt America. Iran offered no retaliation for the downing of Iran Air 655, although they have never forgotten this incident. Iranian terrorist attacks in the 1990's, mostly directed at Israel but including the Khobar Towers attack, were poorly linked to any identifiable goals of statecraft and appeared largely intended to stir the pot and perpetuate conflict. Iran's proxy war in Iraq was by far its most calculated and deliberate campaign of aggression against the U.S. However, for all the damage that Iraqi militias inflicted on U.S. forces, Iran eschewed direct involvement and maintained a degree of plausible deniability. They avoided taking any concrete action that might prompt significant escalation by U.S. forces against Iran, and its leaders lacked a strategy to truly capitalize on their success. Finally, in spite of years of support to Hezbollah and other proxy groups, Iran has confined its attacks against the U.S. almost entirely to the Middle East[6]. With a few notable exceptions, most Iranian action against the U.S. over 40 years has amounted to threats and rhetoric.

[6] The first exception to this rule was the bizarre assassination attempt against the Saudi Ambassador in Washington D.C. in 2011. The other exception has been cyberwarfare. However, the rules of cyberwarfare have yet to be worked out, and most of

Throughout the conflict, both sides established predictable patterns of action and inaction. Iranian leaders understood that as long as they kept their opposition from provoking a full-scale war, they could expect the normal package of reactions that included harsh rhetoric, sanctions, and efforts to isolate Iran internationally. The sanctions became unusually effective between the third and fourth decades with the application of innovative banking tools, but even this happened in a gradual fashion, and Iranians became accustomed to the effects. On the other hand, it was not for a lack of capability that Iranian leaders avoided authorizing terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. They understood this was a red line that could push the relationship into uncharted territory. U.S. leaders understood that military action against Iran would upset regional stability and world oil markets, and Iranian retaliation would place U.S. forces in the Middle East at risk. However, Iran could do little about sanctions, and this gave them an avenue to demonstrate toughness against Iran without alarming the U.S. population.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the U.S. and Iran would have been more circumspect in their mutual antagonism if they had been more afraid of each other. The "phony wars" previously described established a rhythm. It mattered less whether the U.S. and Iran had good information about how the other would react than that both sides believed that they did. As the U.S. and Iranian populations became conditioned to absorb certain forms of deprivation related to the conflict, this further reduced the sense of uncertainty. Thus, the cycle of escalation and de-escalation typical of intractable conflicts in general became a sort of a dance. Is this observation generalizable to other intractable conflicts, though?

Considering the conflict between Pakistan and India, both sides have always represented an existential threat to the other. With large armies and nuclear weapons, each side could inflict massive

Iran's cyber-attacks during the 2010's were relatively cost-free, in terms of retaliation. This appears to be changing as the U.S. develops its cyber policies and capabilities.

damage on the other. But would they? Even before the introduction of nuclear weapons fostered a condition of mutually assured destruction, the conflict was developing patterns. The open warfare between the sides occurred mostly in Kashmir (after Pakistan lost Bangladesh) and in points along the border. Border skirmishes, insurgencies and the sponsorship of terrorist actions developed a rhythm as both sides explored what they could get away with. The India-Pakistan conflict has never been subject to the label of "phony war," like the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. However, it has developed its own dance. Actors on both sides have consistently perceived that they can afford to escalate tensions for domestic political gain without incurring a cost their societies are unwilling to underwrite. This is the space that allows a conflict to develop institutional qualities.

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is another example. This is no "phony war," either. A low level of violence has pervaded across the decades, punctuated by occasional flare-ups. The Israelis have the military capability to annihilate the Palestinians altogether if they chose, but both sides know that they will not do that. In fact, even the most limited military incursions into Palestinian territory inflict a high domestic and international costs on the Israeli government. For the Palestinians, many of them perceive that they have little to lose by antagonizing Israel. There is no shortage of young men willing to risk death or prison. The population is conditioned to the collateral damage that accompanies Israeli military retaliation. Likewise, political actors on the Israeli side can also score points by being uncompromising on the Palestinian issue. Both sides have established their dance. Like the conflict between India and Pakistan, hostility between the Israelis and the Palestinians is overdetermined. Unlike the U.S.-Iranian conflict, there are obvious reasons for hostility that stand up to scrutiny. However, this does not mean that institutional forces are not at work. This dissertation argues that even in overdetermined cases of conflict, institutional forces drive the state of intractability.

What does institutional theory offer to this analysis? First, rational choice can identify a warped incentive structure, but it cannot explain how one comes into existence. Incentive structures are simultaneously the drivers and the products of constituency evolution, in iterative fashion. The mechanisms of institutional development, which this dissertation has explored in depth, mediate between the two functions as constituencies both react to and redefine their world. They entrench patterns in a path-dependent fashion. These patterns cannot predict future events, but they can help describe the manner in which different possibilities are most likely to play out. They can also help to avoid plans based upon wishful thinking that is incompatible with the realities of institutional dynamics.

Second, analysis based upon this approach offers a stark warning to scholars and statesman (and women) alike. When brinksmanship can be carried out for political gain at low cost, the risk is not simply that miscalculation could lead to war. If leaders are successful in this type of behavior, both sides are likely to adopt destructive patterns and see them entrenched over time. Short-term victories on the domestic front can lead to costly and protracted conflict on the international stage. On the other hand, when a state's interests are attacked, rhetoric is a poor substitute for a proportional response. How might the U.S.-Iranian relationship have turned out differently if Carter had blockaded Iranian ports in reaction to the seizure of hostages? Or what if Reagan had authorized the planned air strikes on Hezbollah training camps after the Marine barracks was destroyed? The point is that what seems like prudent restraint in the moment could be a step on the road toward intractable conflict. In essence, this is little more than the wisdom that grade-schoolers learn on the playground, and game theory has explored similar questions, but institutional analysis helps to illuminate when and how these dynamics may play out in complex political situations that are difficult to model.

Cartelized Politics

Based upon observations from the U.S.-Iranian relationship, this dissertation also posits that cartelized politics promotes constituency formation and increases the likelihood that conflict will become intractable. This is less of function of the plurality of views and opinions and more a function of the degree to which those views coalesce into competing groups. It is relatively intuitive that political factions are ready-made institutions, waiting to be drawn into the orbit of other institutions, including one of centered around a conflict. While domestic politics was only one of the *layers* of the U.S.-Iranian conflict, it was the most pervasive. This *layer* operated in every period under study. Further, American observers have often been quick to point out the degree to which factional infighting shapes Iranian politics. This is like the pot calling the kettle black, as political polarization in the U.S. has steadily increased throughout the decades of conflict.

Politics is fundamentally a competition for power, and some degree of factionalism exists in all political systems. Higher levels open the door for linking otherwise unrelated issues to the domestic competition. Jack Snyder (1991) explained how this dynamic operates when he tied cartelized politics to a powerful state's tendencies to engage in imperialism. Drawing on Hobson (original 1902), Snyder built the case that imperialism was a futile enterprise that inevitably strained the resources of a state to line the pockets of the few. He then asked why major historical powers were seduced by this behavior. Snyder's answer was that when domestic politics in a state becomes cartelized, factions engage in "logrolling" to build coalitions and maintain power. Logrolling means that, in order to find common ground, they support each other's expansionist goals. Each faction realizes that imperialism is bad for the state, but this is a diffuse problem with consequences they can put off to the future. The result is an expansionist outcome more extreme than any of the factions would have individually advocated. These

political leaders then cover their tracks with the population by spreading propaganda and weaving ideological narratives that support the overall policy direction.

Snyder's (1991) work does not translate directly to conflict, but his observations are apt. For the imperial powers in Snyder's study, expansion was a low-risk enterprise that was easy to sell to the population, and the bill would not come due until some point in the distant future. The rational choice for politicians was to capitalize on easy gains by supporting imperial policies. For leaders on both sides of the U.S.-Iranian conflict, hostility toward each other has been a relatively low-risk enterprise. With populations conditioned by ideological narratives and used to absorbing the costs, logrolling was evident on both sides. Beyond logrolling, though, both sides engaged in races to the bottom, or competitions of radicalism. The U.S. and Iran had demonized each other in popular narratives, so politicians could periodically score points against each other by appearing tougher. As with Snyder's description of imperialism, this led to more radical policies than either would have chosen individually. The costs would be tomorrow's problem. The U.S.-Iranian conflict suggests that both logrolling and races to the bottom are facilitated by cartelized politics, especially when the conflict is routinized to the point that leaders become comfortable with the risks involved. What Snyder failed to emphasize was that imperialism is an institution, and these practices are especially conducive toward shaping a habitus.

As the reader will recall, this dissertation mentioned Snyder (1991) in reference to the theories that fail to adequately explain the U.S.-Iranian conflict. This was because Snyder's work did not account for mutual construction. His work deftly described a process that occurs within a state, but it was not designed to illustrate the interaction between two states. Institutional theory bridges this gap and helps to emphasize the synergistic nature of a conflict. Competing radicalism on one side is bound to stir a similar process on the other, not immediately, but eventually. Anything that increases the gravitational pull of the conflict increases the likelihood that powerful constituencies will form on both sides and lead

to intractability. In the case of the U.S.-Iran conflict, cartelization was already present on both sides, paving the way for the process.

The role of individual leaders in the institutionalization of conflict

Returning to the endless debate between structure and agency in Political Science, these findings also cast light on the role of individual leaders in causing intractable conflicts. If there was one prominent leader most obviously culpable in fostering this condition between the U.S. and Iran, it was Ayatollah Khomeini. Journalist Kim Ghattas (2020, 7-50) expressed one popular view by painting Khomeini as a master manipulator who hijacked a popular revolution and utilized both violence and deft political maneuvering to secure his rise to power. As this dissertation has shown, part of his effort included deliberately making enemies with the U.S. Most of what Ghattas's work and other leading historical accounts have said about Khomeini is undoubtedly true, and he was certainly responsible for the violence and oppression over which he presided, but from an institutional perspective, one must argue that they give Khomeini entirely too much credit. Khomeini's genius (if one might call it that) lay in his ability to perceive and harness the institutional forces that were already working in Iran.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the "field" was very similar to this dissertation's working definition of institutions, a rule-based social structure that incorporates habitus and in which individuals interact with their world. Cornut (2017) explained that within Bourdieu's field construct, actors exercise agency according to their habitus in improvisational fashion. Success or failure is based largely upon the degree to which their habitus is "attuned" to the field. "Virtuosos" are rare individuals who find themselves so synchronized with the field that their reflexive actions meet with an unusual degree of success most of the time. By this logic, Khomeini might be seen as a virtuoso of his day in Iranian

politics. The degree to which Khomeini manipulated institutional forces or was simply carried by them is debatable, but also irrelevant. Either way, Khomeini represented (and perhaps embodied) forces far greater than himself. The same might be said of any societal leader who seizes upon a particular moment in time and achieves prominence. One could also argue that Barrack Obama succeeded in outwitting the constituencies to garner the JPCOA agreement through his own demonstration of virtuoso, tapping into latent institutional forces that pressed against the conflict. The point for this dissertation, is that understanding why conflicts become intractable requires looking past the personalities or agency of leaders and examining the forces that allow them to succeed.

What Were the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Institutional Lens?

This dissertation has presented a new lens with which to evaluate intractable conflicts. Moreover, one could use this lens to consider any conflict and assess the likelihood that it will develop an intractable nature. It provides an answer to the question of what makes conflict intractable by explaining constituencies to the conflict. It offers an answer to the question of when the conflict will become intractable - when powerful constituencies take shape on both sides of the conflict. It gives tools for tracing the development and evolution of constituencies and it shows how institutional dynamics shape and are in-turn shaped by the conflict. This method reconciles a wide range of both rational choice and socio-culturally based approaches, all of which contribute to conflict analysis, but none of which fully explain intractability.

This model falls short of completely decoding the mysteries of intractable conflict, though. First, constituencies are abstractions, and as such, they are subjective. As previously mentioned, constituencies are usually not self-aware. Somebody has to identify them. This dissertation accounts

for the fact that there are different ways to parse out constituencies, but this may not reconcile all subjective concerns. Further, constituencies are easier to identify in hindsight with long periods of time to study, which brings up the next point. Second, institutional analysis requires long periods of time to study. For historical work, this is not really a problem. Conflicts are not identified as intractable until they have demonstrated some persistence. However, evaluating current conflicts that could become intractable is far trickier. This brings up point number three. Institutions are everywhere, and they are always working. They are a part and parcel with the social nature of humanity. How then, does one choose the right institutions to focus on in relation to a conflict or potential conflict? There is no hard and fast answer to this question, but this dissertation contends that the continued practice of institutional analysis will reveal helpful guidelines.

Another potential challenge to utilizing this model is definitional in nature. This dissertation described intractable conflict as a protracted struggle between two states (or aspiring states) lasting more than a generation which for both parties has become divorced from the greater interest of the societies they represent. First, after examining the U.S.-Iranian case, continuity between generations appears more a telltale symptom of intractability than a hard and fast rule. The U.S. and Iran developed a recognizable institution of animosity in approximately fifteen years, suggesting that the criteria for intractability should be reconsidered. Second, the assessment of a society's greater good will always require a subjective evaluation. Conceptions of national interest are inherently contested, and candidates for inclusion in this category necessarily align with the parochial interest of the parties that put them forward. As the first chapter showed, the U.S.-Iranian conflict was an ideal test case for the institutional model because it involved such a low degree of broader societal interest on both sides, but even this is debatable. Unfortunately, most conflicts are more complicated because core national interests are more apparent. This does not mean that peace would not benefit both societies. It does not mean that constituencies are not the primary roadblock to resolution of the conflict. What it does

mean is that the definition of intractability will have to be reconsidered in order to study many of the conflicts that the modern world considers intractable through this approach.

Lastly, the answer to the fundamental question of this dissertation is not entirely complete. Conflicts become intractable when they develop into institutions of animosity. The model cannot predict exactly when this will happen, though. This dissertation has offered some insights into what makes it more likely, but it cannot definitively answer the question, especially not in a generalizable fashion. In fact, intractability (by any definition) may be difficult to detect until it is firmly entrenched. On the other hand, anything is easier to detect once you start looking for it, and this model provides tools to do just that.

What Are the Next Steps in Developing a Broader Institutional Theory of Conflict?

This dissertation has thoroughly examined the institutional approach in the case of the U.S.-Iranian conflict, but is this approach truly generalizable to other intractable cases? The next important step in the application of institutional theory to the study conflict would be to test this out. The most basic methodology for doing this would be a comparative case study of multiple conflicts that examines the degree to which institutionalization correlates with the prolongation of a conflict. Such an endeavor would face a number of challenges, the first being case selection.

As the previous section explained, a subjective definition of intractability could make it difficult to find cases to compare, even when a general consensus exists that certain conflicts are intractable. The researcher would be better off in this case simply picking conflicts that have endured for a set number of years. Another aspect of case selection to consider would be the time periods to study.

Historical conflicts provide the easiest cases for research purposes, but no conflict lasts forever. Knowing the final outcome, the question becomes, when were they intractable? This brings up another possibility. One could treat different time periods as separate cases. If the claims of this dissertation are generalizable, then one would expect to see a different set of institutional conditions during the period of intractability than during the period in which a resolution was reached. One must also consider cases where a resolution was reached, but it did not endure. If this is not accounted for, the researcher might draw misleading conclusions from the study.

The next challenge would be choosing an appropriate measure to examine institutionalization. Unfortunately, this concept does not lend itself well to quantification. On the other end of the spectrum, a researcher might simply establish criteria and use a binary approach - either the criteria is met or it is not. This dissertation argues that institutionalization of conflict requires powerful constituencies to the conflict, and that they exist on both sides. Both could be answered with a yes or no. The problem with a binary approach is that institutionalization (and intractability) are matters of degree. Therefore, the challenge to the researcher would be to develop an ordinal ranking system that allows for meaningful comparison between different structures of constituency.

Returning to the problems inherent in defining intractability, there is a limit to what such a comparative study can show. Even assuming that one conducted a "large-n" study with dozens or even hundreds of cases over a period of multiple centuries, and they established a strong correlation between constituency formation and intractability, this does not prove causation. There could be confounding variables yet to be considered. For example, one might argue that the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is rooted in the fundamental problem that both groups have built their identities around a piece of ground they cannot both occupy. Perhaps constituency formation is a

symptom of the deeper problems causing intractability, not the cause. This brings up one of the most fundamental challenges in the field of Political Science.

However, proving causation is a bar that has never been decisively met, and it is not necessary in this case. As this dissertation has shown, constituencies cannot be meaningfully identified without a historical examination that involves in-depth temporal analysis. The practice of process tracing helps to illuminate the actors and the course of events that help to build a conflict. It is especially helpful at debunking broad generalizations. Returning to the Israeli-Palestinian example, it shows that certain actions had little (if anything) to do with a fight over land and everything to do with power struggles over a broad range of unrelated interests that may not have even existed when the newfound state of Israel occupied the soil. Therefore, any meaningful comparative case study must incorporate in-depth analysis of every conflict. This means that the "large-n" approach will probably never be practical.

The payoff for wrestling with these challenges is that one could more decisively pinpoint the role of institutional forces in human conflict. A general institutional theory might be useful, not only to intractable interstate conflict, but any manner of societal hostility. As with any theory, it would not answer every question, but it could provide an extremely useful lens for examining the topic and help to recast existing theories in a more productive manner.

Conclusion

Are the U.S. and Iran doomed to conflict? A 40-year track record is not easily overcome. Yet institutional forces are always at work, and they are not always apparent until after the fact. These foundational shifts can leave an institution vulnerable to unexpected events, which might shift the

entire course of the conflict. Further, even apparently failed attempts at cooperation and rapprochement, such as the JPCOA, can have long-term effects in a positive direction. Kupchan (2010) pointed out that rapprochement between adversaries is often built upon a series of failed attempts that finally gain traction. A detailed analysis of the state of institutional forces between the U.S. and Iran since 2018 is beyond the scope of this work, but there is certainly hope. The key lesson of this dissertation, though, is that constituencies will not fail to act like constituencies. It would be unrealistic to expect a major change in the relationship unless the institutional processes of *displacement and conversion*, *layering*, *drift*, or *exhaustion* divert the interests of constituencies on both sides of the conflict. Unfortunately, the implication of this rule is that intractable conflict often ends only when a new conflict or crisis takes its place. One might have hoped that the 2020 global pandemic caused by COVID-19 might have carried such a silver lining, but this has not proven to be the case, so far. One can only hope that the situation (or combination of situations) that cures the U.S.-Iranian conflict will not be worse than the disease.

In the meantime, understanding the institutional aspects and dynamics of conflict could provide an important lens for explaining a number of hard cases. Appreciating the forces that lead to intractability is an important step toward preventing them. In the perpetuation of conflict, constituencies operate unconsciously, but people do not. It is not inconceivable that statesmen (and women) of our age, armed with an understanding of how institutions relate to conflict, could develop strategies that prevent or reverse some of these quagmires for future generations.

APPENDIX A – A MEDIA REVOLUTION AND THE NARRATIVES OF ANIMOSITY

The Islamic revolution, arguably beginning in 1978, surprised the West and unleashed a wave of criticism regarding the way in which the U.S. news media had covered and was continuing to cover Iran. It should also be noted that, in many cases, European reporting (British and French, in particular) demonstrated higher quality than that of the U.S. (Said 1997, 123-133), but some problems were systemic within media outlets across the West. James Bill (1978, 323-324) was an early voice of dissent, describing U.S. press coverage throughout the Shah's reign as "consistently sparse, superficial, and distorted," and he accused America's major newspapers of "misrepresenting the nature and depth of opposition to the Shah." U.S. coverage of Iran during the Shah's reign (Dorman, 1986, 432-435) generally aligned itself with the ruling regime or with U.S. policymaker assessments. Criticism of the Shah or the U.S. relationship with Iran occurred primarily at the margins and only within an already established framework of U.S. policy concerns. When the revolution brought Iran to the attention of most Americans for the first time, it changed the context in which reporting took place, but it did not change the methods or the underlying worldview. Dorman (1986, 426) described how, in 1978 and 1979, over 300 Western journalists "parachuted" into Iran to get the scoop on the breaking story. Very few of them spoke the langue or had any great familiarity with Iran, and most were dependent on the same circle of "safe," Westernized Iranians that U.S. government officials were criticized for favoring. While able to cover events, media reporting largely helped to ossify existing biases regarding the forces behind them.

James Rubin (1980, 337-356) took a different view, and he assessed these accusations by examining U.S. newspaper coverage of Iran throughout the 1970's and into the hostage crisis. His work

found that the diversity of the news media made accurate generalizations difficult, and there were many examples of accurate and insightful reporting that appeared throughout the decade. By 1975, Iran was also the most covered "third-world" country in the U.S. newspapers. Taken in aggregate, however, there were some systemic challenges. First, the U.S. news media is consumer driven, and international news, in general, has usually taken a back seat to domestic issues. The best reporting on Iran probably garnered little readership without a crisis. Further, Western reporters tend to be generalists as opposed to specialists, in order to cover the most exciting topics at any given time. Second, the U.S. viewed Iran through a regional, primarily Cold War lens. Critical reporting was directed toward hot-button policy issues like arms sales or (eventually) human rights that often missed the larger picture. Third, under the Shah, information in Iran was controlled, and even foreign journalists were subject to pressure and manipulation by the government, increasingly so as the revolution unfolded.

Beyond censorship, Dorman's (1986, 427-428) work added the point that even though the U.S. press was not restricted domestically, it has always been swayed by widely shared ideologies - conscious and subconscious assumptions about America's place in the world. These ideologies act as a form of "internal constraint," both on what is reported and how. The press retained the appearance of unbiased reporting by criticizing policymakers, but in most cases, they simply evaluated tactics without questioning underlying assumptions.

Rubin (1980, 350-364) focused his harshest criticism on U.S. press coverage of the religious factions in the revolution, and he described the lack of understanding by reporters as "nothing short of appalling." U.S. media covered Iran's clerics, especially Khomeini, with an exotic fetishism, but they still managed to completely underestimate their influence. Further, the "crash-course" approach taken by reporters to understand Iran left them unable to effectively translate the perspective of this tremendously important element for the U.S. public.

When the hostage crisis occurred, it generated unprecedented media coverage in the U.S. Aside from print and radio, television news was already poised to make an evolutionary leap. The *ABC* network created a nightly news program specifically to cover the crisis, marking the count of every day in dramatic fashion. This evolved into *Nightline*, a news show which endures to this day. This style of coverage, with soap-opera-like narratives, would eventually pave the way for the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle a decade later. Because Americans were so emotionally invested in the crisis, it became a prime case study in the interplay between policy and media, arguably the first of its kind (See Larson 1986). A New York Times thought piece offered a succinct explanation of why this incident was so traumatic for the American public and why this trauma played so deeply into national policy.

> "There seem to have been four factors in the release of the emotional torrent. First, the Americans seized were for the most part civilians whose families we grew to know and whose fate we worried about because of a natural sense of kinship with identifiable victims. Second, their captivity offered the American people an unaccustomed opportunity to unite and play the role of aggrieved party in an otherwise ambiguous situation. Third, the national fixation was at least in part a product of the actions of President Carter. And fourth, it was a product of the attention of the news media. Each of these factors needs to be examined if one is to understand the meaning of the American reaction to the events in Iran." (New York Times 1981)

Because of this interplay, the media had a tremendous role in constructing the narratives which the U.S. would carry forward regarding Iran after the crisis. Said (1997, 81-123) described how Islamic extremism became simplified and lumped together with everything else that Americans considered evil in the world. The treatment of Iran and its people by "expert" commentators carried a strong orientalist flavor. Discussions of "who lost Iran?" carried imperialistic overtones suggesting that Iran belonged to the U.S. Iranians were portrayed as irrational, feeding the "Mad Mullah" label. The very concept of change in geopolitics took on a negative connotation, so instead of evaluating agents of change on their merits, the American worldview retrenched itself. Further, because of the expansion of coverage, air-time had to be filled even in the absence of new developments, leaving ample room for speculation and

hyperbole. It became politically convenient to denigrate Iran, so commentators frequently did not even bother learning to pronounce the names of Iranian people or places correctly.

Scott (2000) revealed another aspect of the narrative produced by the West in reaction to the hostage crisis. The "captivity narrative" is deeply embedded in the American experience - the idea of civilized society pushing against the surrounding savages. Stories of captivity by the natives invoke not only a morbid fascination, but also a sense of comradery and common purpose. Tales of daring rescue, real or imagined, inspire and bind polite society. The hostage crisis united Americans in solidarity, even those who disagreed on how to handle the situation, and it created a powerful vehicle with which to "other" Iran.

Iran's press, on the other hand, underwent a complex transition throughout the revolution that far exceeds the scope of this work. In the space of only a couple of years, the Iranian media went from a height of censorship under the Shah, to a brief but chaotic flowering as all restrictions suddenly collapsed, to capture and competition by factional interests, to a new state of censorship and government control. While Iranian outlets still mattered to their own people, especially for domestic issues, Iranians largely became fixated on U.S. reporting during the hostage crisis. As Rubin (1980, 340-341, 356-364) pointed out, Iranians lacked a tradition of free media in their own country, so they made little distinction between the U.S. media and its government. Just as the explosion in television was transforming the West, Iranians were gaining unprecedented access to the outside world, and many Iranian leaders pored over Western media stories. Sensational headlines seemed like proof of effect that their policies were sending the desired message. Khomeini's followers (Sreberny and Mohammadi 1994, 119-135) had become adept at harnessing new forms of media during the revolution, including cassette tapes, xerox leaflets, and press releases to foreign journalists. Khomeini himself had leveraged the foreign press during his time in Paris to undermine the Shah. The radical clerics understood the

value of propaganda, and after winning an information war against the Shah, they probably believed they could now manipulate the U.S. in similar fashion.

Additionally, Iranian leaders (Rubin 1980, 356-364) appeared to genuinely believe that if Americans were made aware of their grievances, many would rally to the support the Islamic Republic. Their sense of frustration grew, however, when this did not appear to be the case. Iranians were looking for stories that highlighted the oppression of the Shah and his international supporters, justifying their revolution. They chafed when they (instead of the Shah) were branded as human rights abusers for meting out their version of justice against the former regime. Iranian leaders increasingly began to view Western journalists as spies attempting to undermine the revolution, and hostility against them increased.

Far from being resolved with time, the media-related pathologies born of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the succeeding hostage crisis continued to fester and grow, coloring the U.S.-Iranian relationship at every stage of the relationship. Iranian leaders have persistently overestimated the attention that the U.S. population pays to Iran, and their attempts to manipulate Western perceptions through by headline-grabbing statements and actions have generally backfired. Within the U.S., press coverage of Iran within the mainstream media has rarely moved beyond shallow tropes which either demonize their subjects or mirror-image them in a Western lens. A thriving discussion regarding Iran has grown within academic circles, but even this has often been colored by contentious political agendas of varying stripes, so there has not been a unified front from which to challenge the mainstream views. The impacts of the media on the institutionalization of the U.S.-Iran conflict cannot be underestimated, but this is a multi-faceted problem that deserved a full study of its own.

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BIOGRAPHY AND CURRICULUM VITAE – JOSEPH D. BECKER

Colonel Joseph D. Becker was commissioned in the U.S. Army as an Infantry Officer in 1996 out of the Virginia Tech where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Industrial and Systems Engineering. His first assignment was to Camp Casey, Korea, where he served as a Rifle Platoon Leader and the Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) Executive Officer in the 1/503 Air Assault Battalion. Following Korea, he served as a Company Executive Officer and an Assistant Battalion Operations Officer in the 1/61 Infantry Battalion at Fort Jackson, SC, conducting Initial Entry Training for incoming soldiers.

As a Captain, Joe assessed into the Army Special Forces Branch, and after training, he served in the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Campbell, KY. During this time, he led two Operational Detachments Alpha (ODA's) and served as both a Company Executive Officer and a Battalion Assistant Operations Officer. Joe also conducted multiple tours in the Middle East region in support of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). As a Major, Joe supported U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He also assisted with the stand-up of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Following these positions, Joe served on the Army Staff in the Pentagon as a Strategic Planner, and then as a Branch Chief for strategic issues.

As a Lieutenant Colonel, Joe was afforded the opportunity to teach and mentor mid-career officers and civilians as a graduate faculty instructor for Professional Military Education. His courses focused on global strategic matters and Middle East regional studies. Following his teaching assignment, Joe served as a policy planner at the National Counterterrorism Center, where he was later selected as the Executive Officer for the Director for Strategic Operational Planning (DSOP).

Joe's civilian education includes a Bachelor of Science in Industrial and Systems Engineering from Virginia Tech and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Webster University. Joe is a fellow in the Army Strategic Planning and Policy Program (ASP3) and has submitted this dissertation in fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Political Science from the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

Joe's military education includes Senior Service College (SSC) equivalency, Intermediate Level Education (ILE), the Infantry Captains Career Course, and the Combined Arms Services and Staff School (CAS3). Joe's awards and decorations include three Bronze Stars, three Defense Meritorious Service Medals, the Army's Meritorious Service Medal, the Ranger Tab, and the Army Staff Badge.

Joe is married to Ann Becker and has six children, Ian, Erin, Mitchell, Abbie Grace, Evan, and Immy.

Published Work

"Strategy in the New Era of Tactical Nuclear Weapons" – published in ***Strategic Studies Quarterly***, (Volume 14, Issue 1 – Spring 2020). **Winner of the 2020 General Larry D. Welch Deterrence Writing Award** (Senior Division) sponsored by U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM).

"Building Strategic Influence: The SOF Role in Political Warfare" – published in ***Special Warfare***, (Volume 31, Issue 1 – January to March 2018).

"Why the U.S. Military Should Support Domestic CVE" – published in ***Perspectives on Terrorism***, (Volume 11, Issue 3 - June 2017).

"Intelligence Analysts: Continuing Education for Enduring Strategic Value" – International Association for Intelligence Educators (IAFIE) **2015 Essay Contest award winner** for best essay in the Professional Category, published in the ***American Intelligence Journal*** (Volume 33, No. 1 - 2016).

Review essay of Barry Posen's *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* – published in ***PRISM*** (Volume 5, Issue 3 - 2015).

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Book review of Davies and Gustafson's *Intelligence Elsewhere: Spies and Espionage Outside the Anglosphere* – published in ***Parameters*** (Winter, 2014).

Book review of Vali Nasr's *Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* – published in the ***American Intelligence Journal*** (Volume 31, No. 1 - 2013).